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Scream from the Heart: Yoko Ono's Rock and Roll Revolution

par

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Abstract: While most academic scholarship on Yoko Ono focuses on her work as a pioneering conceptual and performance artist, little has been devoted to her accomplishments as an experimental rock vocalist. In this paper, I will discuss Yoko Ono's searing vocalizations, or screams, as politically charged instances of abject sonic art, situated within the tumultuous socio-political context of 1960's U.S. counterculture. Interpreting Yoko Ono's pioneering vocal performances from the albums, *Yoko Ono: Plastic Ono Band* (1970) and *Fly* (1971), Ono's revolutionary impulse to 'shout from the heart' will be treated as a move to redefine musical expression through gendered processes of abjection and cultural resistance.

Keywords : *Gender – rock 'n' roll – counterculture – avant-garde – Free Speech Movement (FSM) – abjection – body politics*

Résumé : Alors que la majorité de la littérature universitaire traitant de Yoko Ono se concentre sur son rôle pionnier en tant qu'artiste conceptuelle et performeuse, peu de recherches ont porté sur ce qu'elle a accompli en tant que chanteuse rock expérimentale. Dans cet article, je traiterai de la virulence de son expression vocale – ses cris – en tant qu'exemples politiquement signifiants d'un art sonore abject, situés dans le contexte sociopolitique tumultueux de la contre-culture américaine des années 1960. À partir de l'analyse de ses performances vocales sur les albums *Yoko Ono: Plastic Ono Band* (1970) et *Fly* (1971), l'élan révolutionnaire d'Ono – son « cri du cœur » – sera considéré comme un geste de redéfinition de l'expression musicale par des processus générés d'abjection et de résistance culturelle.

Mots-clés : *Genre – rock 'n' roll – contre-culture – avant-garde – Free Speech Movement – abjection – politique du corps*

Sisters, O sisters
 Lets stand up right now
 It's never too late
 To shout from the heart
 Yoko ONO, 'Sisters, O Sisters', Sometime
 in New York City (1972)

Yoko breaks through more barriers with one scream
 than most musicians do in a lifetime
 Bill McALLISTER, *Record Mirror* (1971)

While most academic scholarship on Yoko Ono focuses on her work as a pioneering conceptual and performance artist, little has been devoted to her accomplishments as an experimental rock vocalist who revolutionised women's vocal practice in the late twentieth century. In this paper, I will discuss Yoko Ono's searing vocalisations, or *screams* – for lack of a more refined terminology – as politically charged instances of abject sonic art¹, situated within the tumultuous socio-political context of 1960s U.S. counterculture. As a feminist performer, Yoko Ono's revolutionary impulse to 'shout from the heart' will be treated as a move to redefine musical expression through gendered processes of abjection and cultural resistance – her vocal performances constituting an impassioned response to contemporary movements in art and politics.

Whether working in the media of conceptual art, performance art, or popular music, Yoko Ono's creative output reflects one woman's drive to challenge the socially constructed boundaries that prescribe and delimit the acceptable parameters of artistic experience.² To this end, the impetus behind Ono's subversive work is in part derived from her early involvement in avant-garde art scenes, primarily the

Fluxus movement in 1950s and 1960s New York. During this period, New York was emerging as the center of what would later come to be termed conceptual art and performance art – art forms that disputed the humanistic ideal of 'art as historical object', demanding that art be redefined as a processual encounter unfolding between a work and its audience.

This radical reconceptualisation of art was nothing less than revolutionary. Susan Sontag, in her influential essay, 'One Culture and the New Sensibility', rightly observed a drastic 'transformation of the function of art' occurring throughout the 1960s (Sontag 1966: 296). According to the identified 'new sensibility', artistic praxis was to be (re)conceived as an extension of life rather than a detached commentary upon life. As an artist who actively established herself as a leading international figure in the art world during this time period, it follows that Ono's own works espouse this revolutionary 'new sensibility' – infusing a life-affirming energy into the rarefied world of 'high' art.

A key aspect of the 'new sensibility', as defined by Sontag, was the move to include all art forms, both 'high' and 'low', within an egalitarian, inclusive definition of 'art'.³ Exemplifying this practice of the 'new sensibility', Yoko Ono, the avant-garde conceptual artist, opened herself to the possibility of carrying out her artistic experimentations within the world of rock and roll. Through her creative partnership with John Lennon, Yoko Ono gained access to some of the most influential popular musicians of the 1960s. Her arrival on the rock and roll scene was welcomed by the more discerning, forward-thinking recording artists of the time. Throughout the 1960s, there

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was an increased interest in avant-garde or 'high' art musical experimentation amongst popular musicians, two notable examples of this phenomenon being the influence of Stockhausen's tape compositions upon the Beatles' studio practices, as well as Robert Scheff's noise experiments at the Ann Arbor ONCE festivals taking hold of a young Iggy Pop. Prior to joining forces with John Lennon, Yoko Ono was involved in avant-garde, Cagean experimental music circles, and her familiarity with electroacoustic music contributed to her unique interpretation of rock and roll according to a 'new sensibility'. Ono's experimentation in popular music was thus initiated at a time when the socio-cultural function of rock and roll was shifting from that of 'relaxation and diversion', towards fulfilling a more artistic, reflexive, and often overtly political function (Sontag 1966: 303).

By the late 1960s, Yoko Ono thus occupied a borderline position within the U.S. cultural sphere, working coterminously within the realms of avant-garde conceptual art and rock and roll. Embracing the transformative, 'new sensibility' of the era, Ono's musical experimentations were undergirded by her countercultural political convictions, particularly her commitment to the Women's Movement. Throughout her extensive career, Yoko Ono has constituted a powerful feminist voice within global popular culture. Her musical output often deals explicitly with themes of gender inequality, oppression, and the need for feminist cultural resistance. According to art historian Midori Yoshimoto, Ono has repeatedly claimed that for her, 'art is a means of survival' (Yoshimoto 2005: 79). Ono's creative urgency thus points to a wider political aim of employing

artistic processes as a means of 'surviving' within the world at large. As a Japanese woman active in white male-dominated avant-garde art circles as well as the notoriously androcentric world of rock and roll, Ono was faced with the challenge of inserting herself into powerful, hegemonic cultural milieux that discouraged the participation of independent, creative women – and moreover, women identified as racially 'other'. Indeed, Ono's will to 'survive' through art was initiated in response to the oppressive forces that sought to silence her creative voice, and relegate her to the margins.

In response to such silencing forces, Yoko Ono's feminist anthem, 'Sisters, O Sisters' (1972), calls for women to vocalise their demand for equality – to 'shout from the heart'. Given Ono's native Japanese cultural background, her usage of the term, 'heart' can be interpreted in terms of the Japanese Buddhist notion of *kokoro*, an expression encompassing Western conceptions of heart and spirit, pointing to the deepest reaches of human feeling and interiority. According to the revolutionary sentiment expressed in 'Sisters, O Sisters', then, the most effective expressions of feminist cultural and political resistance emerge from the 'deepest reaches' of the gendered, female body. In her more experimental musical works predating 'Sisters, O Sisters', such as the searing, 'Why?' (1970), and 'Don't Worry Kyoko (Mommy's Only Looking for Her Hand in the Snow)' (1969/1971), Ono's screams emerge from the depths of her body, unleashing a subversive vocality that threatens to destabilise not only the boundary between music and noise, but also the gendered and racialised sonic codes that delineate acceptable modes of vocal musical expression. In their politicised

interpretation, Ono's unruly vocalisations thus point back to the deepest reaches of her own unique, albeit gendered and racialised body.

In this paper, Yoko Ono's extreme vocalisations will thus be treated as revolutionary cultural expressions that constitute visceral responses to 1960s and early 1970s political movements and countercultural practices. Taking as a starting point the assertion that the power of Ono's 'scream' lies in its violent, jarring evocation of an intense bodily immediacy, I would like to argue that this 'bodily immediacy' that is produced by her 'scream' is also bound to paradoxical process of bodily abjection. My central contention is that in the context of Yoko Ono's vocal performances, the scream functions as an act of sonic abjection, and brings to the fore a marginalised body negotiating, and defying, its own liminal borders within the wider socio-political formation. The following discussion is structured in two parts: first, I will provide a psycho-social interpretation of Kristeva's theory of abjection as a means of understanding the scream as an embodied, revolutionary vocalisation and a politicised mode of artistic expression; second, I will contextualise Yoko Ono's screams as extreme vocalisations that straddle the liminal boundaries of numerous contemporary, revolutionary and countercultural discourses and practices. Each section will integrate interpretive musical observations; Yoko Ono's extreme vocal works from the albums, *Yoko Ono: Plastic Ono Band* (1970) and *Fly* (1971) will be considered as evocations of an immediate, revolutionary, abject body politics.

The Scream as Sonic Abjection

In the field of academic musicology, Tamara Levitz stands as one of the few scholars to date who has engaged with the music, and revolutionary vocal practices of Yoko Ono. In her article, 'The Unfinished Music of John and Yoko: Imagining Gender and Racial Equality in the Late 1960s', Levitz provides an insightful, even poetic, interpretation of the musical nuances of Ono's oeuvre, taking into account the gendered discourses of eastern philosophy and Cagean avant-gardism that come to be challenged and reinterpreted through Ono's performances. In her discussion of Ono's work, Levitz puts forward the notion that Ono's extreme vocalisations give rise to an increased awareness of the performer's body – in Levitz's view, Ono's 'screams' thus constitute extreme acts of corporeal expression that cannot be achieved through more conventional, lyrical practices of 'singing'. Levitz writes:

"[Ono's] voice is not beautiful, lyrical, or accompanimental, and thus does not inspire daydreaming or nostalgia. Rather, it forces an awareness of Yoko's very real existence, as it relates imaginatively with listeners' own inner sounds and the emotions attached to them" (Levitz, 2005: 223).

For Levitz, Ono's vocal performance communicates a sense of her bodily interiority that in turn resonates with listeners' own experience of their bodies. This visceral, embodied connection between performer and listener is thus distinguished from the wistful 'daydreams' inspired by lyrical singing. Following Levitz' interpretation, we might infer that in order for a vocal performance to inspire a 'daydream', or any form of escapist fantasy, it must follow an established semiotic code that in turn garners a pre-conceived

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aesthetic response in the listener. Ono's performance of her sonic bodily interiority, however, gives rise to a shared experience of the 'inner sounds' that precede symbolisation. Further, Levitz proposes that these 'inner sounds' are tied to 'emotions', thereby implying that it is possible that human affective experience *precedes* the codified realm of semiotic abstraction. Such an affective experience would no doubt be distinguished from the codified affects transmitted through standardised musical practices.

As a means of theorizing Levitz' above-mentioned proposition, I will turn to the work of French revisionist psychoanalyst, Julia Kristeva, whose work provides a critical exploration of the embodied aspect informing linguistic and artistic processes. Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984) offers a psychoanalytic perspective on the embodied, material processes that undergird discursive formations, and the development of human subjectivity. Within this influential work, Kristeva develops a unique mode of semiotic analysis, identifying two oppositional, yet coterminous properties of discourse: the symbolic and the semiotic. While the 'symbolic' refers to all extant linguistic and cultural systems that construct meaning, the 'semiotic' points to the sonorous qualities of language, and the material, embodied experience that lies beyond (or within the fissures of) the 'symbolic'. According to the Kristevan model, a 'revolution' in language occurs in the enunciative moment when the semiotic collides with the symbolic – that is, when language assumes its embodied manifestation. According to a Kristevan perspective, the revolutionary potential of artistic practice lies in its capacity to bring about such a collision within a politicised context; the artist's 'semiotic disposition'

thus enables 'the critique and renewal of discourse' (Barrett, 2011:13). Turning to the realm of musical practice, then, one can say that Levitz' identified modes of acceptable singing – 'beautiful, lyrical, accompanimental' – each conform to abstract, 'symbolic' systems and standard conventions that guarantee and maintain musical 'meaning' within a given social order. On the other hand, Ono's 'inner sounds' suggest a semiotic disposition dangerously encroaching on the threshold of the 'symbolic' – embodied, visceral vocalisations that promise a Kristevan revolution in 'musical language'.

The Kristevan model of the 'semiotic' and the 'symbolic' is not a dialectical binary, but rather marks an attempt to formulate a relational dynamic that accounts for the often conflictual relationship between the materiality of human lived experience and the abstractions of human consciousness that forms subjectivity, language, and discursive meaning. While Ono's 'screams' thus occupy a Kristevan 'semiotic disposition', it is also true that her 'semiotic' vocalisations often simultaneously occupy a liminal space both *within and without* a 'symbolic', codified range of vocal expression. Ono's extreme vocalisations often slip into ranges of codifiable musical expression, sometimes even pronouncing discernible words and phrases, or repeating melodic patterns – but Ono refuses to linger in the realm of the symbolic.

Listening to a piece such as 'Why?', the opening track from Yoko Ono's first solo record, *Yoko Ono/Plastic Ono Band* (1970), the listener is assaulted with a series of brutal 'screams' presenting a fraught imbroglia of bodily 'noises' that disrupt, defy, and ultimately transfigure various musico-symbolic codes. Interpreted solely in terms of its lyrical 'symbolic'

content, this piece consists of a repetition of the word, 'why'. While the contour of the word, 'why', is repeatedly conjured, however, the searing ebb and flow of screams brutally deconstruct the word to the point of collapsing its symbolic manifestation. The choice of the word, 'why', is significant, in that it constitutes a highly polysemous utterance. Based on the inflection of the speaker/singer's voice, as well as the semantic context, the meaning of 'why' changes drastically. 'Why' might alternately function as a question, an answer ('that is why'), a demand, or as an expression of insurmountable grief or rage. In the course of Ono's performance, the many meanings of 'why' are rendered and rent in turn, giving rise to a vocal persona in conflict with a verbal symbolic order.

Although academic musicology has yet to fully explore the implications of applying a Kristevan conception of the 'symbolic' and 'semiotic' to a musical context, in the context of my interpretation of 'Why?', I will propose that the 'symbolic' musical content can be heard in the performance of the rhythm section. After a chaotic intro of merely 17 seconds, Ringo Starr settles into an almost ironically regular 4/4 beat, and Klaus Voorman grooves on an ascending scalar bass riff. While the drums provide a straight rock and roll backbeat, the bass riff emphasises the first beat of the measure, suggesting a funk influence; linked together, these two highly repetitive rhythmic phrases construct a bouncy, driving cross-rhythm that sounds 'unbreakable', endlessly chugging along a steady course. A strong sense of rhythmic regularity is thus established early on in the piece, and it is against this order, a kind of musical 'symbolic', that Yoko Ono's vocal performance exerts a disruptive influence. Mimicking the timbre of the distorted

electric guitar, Yoko Ono's maniacal vocal acrobatics compete with John Lennon's shrieking guitar slides. The vocal techniques that Ono employs in the performance are mainly derived from her avant-garde experimentations with the Nagra recorder. Utilizing this technology, Ono would practise singing along to her voice played backwards, and at high frequencies (Woo 2006: 286). In liberating her singing voice from a linguistic intonation, Ono is able to veer into a liminal sonic space that is at once music and noise. Feminist rock historian Gillian Gaar describes the sonic context of this piece as 'a harsh, confrontational barrage of noise in which the instrumentation and vocals were just barely restrained from tumbling over into complete chaos' (Gaar, 1992: 234).

Taking into account the often jarring juxtapositions that constitute any one of Ono's extreme vocal works, it is possible to consider these as expressions of a fragmented bodily interiority. While such 'screams' challenge the border between music and bodily noise, the disjunctive, jarring succession of vocalisations also simultaneously challenge the listener's ability to construe Ono's own performative persona as a unified subjectivity, and indeed, whether her bodily interiority is in fact a singular material reality, or a performed amalgam of *bodily interiorities*. Lennon's famous characterisation of Ono as 'the woman with the 16 track voice', indicates that her experimental vocal techniques had the effect of not only causing a rupture within standard musical practice, but also rupturing her own vocal subjectivity. Rather than a unified bodily interiority, Ono's vocal contortions point to a bodily interiority-in-process, that is, a body consisting of multiple, fragmented, often opposing, material 'interiorities' vying for sonic existence.

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Considering Yoko Ono's performance of 'Don't Worry Kyoko (Mommy's Only Looking for her Hand in the Snow)' included on her 1971 album, *Fly*, her vocal subjectivity shifts radically, suggesting the presence of multiple 'voices' within the singing subject. In my interpretation, 'Don't Worry Kyoko' unfolds as a competitive timbral tug-of-war between at least three distinct voices: that of the kabuki vibrato, the alto voice repeatedly intoning the words 'don't worry', and a high-pitched, cyborgian vocality that suggests a machine-like, synthesised quality – one that vacillates between artificial and hyper-feminine. As an avant-garde artist who was interested in incorporating aural experimentation into her conceptual art throughout the 1960s, Yoko Ono was highly influenced by 'John Cage's decision to widen the range of sounds available for purposes of musical composition' (Danto 2005: 70). Indeed, Yoko's performances reveal a host of vocal influences, ranging from animalistic noises, to the highly refined art of kabuki, and Second Viennese School opera. Her ability to shift between these radical vocal subjectivities with such visceral power is a testament to Yoko Ono's early training in opera performance.⁴

Ono's subversive, transformative vocalisations thus resist categorisation according to the widely adopted musical 'symbolic' codes that would render them 'beautiful, lyrical, or accompanimental'; instead, Ono's 'screams' are violent, revolutionary expulsions emerging from an unstable body, an interiority-in-process. The 'semiotic rupture' that results as the visceral origins of the 'scream' collide with the threshold of the 'symbolic' can be understood as a subversive instance of border-crossing. As a mode of psycho-social critique, Kristeva's theoretic

cal models thus enable a connection to be forged between embodied processes of artistic expression and wider political aims of socio-cultural subversion, and revolt. In her influential work, *Kristeva and the Political* (2005), Cecilia Sjöholm provides the following assessment:

"The writings of Kristeva were, already from the start, politically motivated. Rather than project has consisted of a systematic displacement of politics from the public to the intimate domain of signification." (Sjöholm 2005: 3)

Always critical of second-wave feminist identity politics that put forward the individual as a unified subjectivity, Kristeva proposes a mode of approaching human expression and individuality as radically embodied, heterogeneous processes. In every instance of human expression, the 'semiotic' and 'symbolic' are brought into dialogue, resulting in a dynamic process of meaning formation whereby bodily noise, silence, and non-language are expelled in order to re-establish symbolic codes that guarantee meaning. The political dimension of artistic practice lies in its capacity to bring about a revolutionary reconfiguration of the symbolic order through creatively enacting moments of semiotic rupture.

The Kristevan theory of the abject, expounded in her 1982 work, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, thematically anticipates the concepts of border-crossing and liminality central to *Revolution in Poetic Language*. In *Powers of Horror*, however, Kristeva chooses to theorise processes of subject formation rather than linguistic expression, focussing on the negative drive to expulsion that undergirds subjective individuation. The trauma of birth, and one's separation from the mother's body, lies at the heart

of Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory of abjection – and this fear-inspiring moment of expulsion is thought to form the basis of later psychological processes of subject formation.

Considered in the context of human development, the first experience of abjection occurs at the moment of birth: the child emerges as a discrete individual, while still maintaining a connection to the mother's body. In this scenario, the mother is not an 'object' distinguished by the child, rather, the maternal body is abject, occupying a liminal space that is at once self and other. Within a Western patriarchal context, as the child matures, the abject space of the maternal must be repressed in favour of the law of the Father, represented by the symbolic order. The unspeakable 'horror' that underlies abjection, and subject formation, can thus be interpreted, from a feminist perspective, as the horror of gendered repression. What renders this form of repression, or expulsion of the maternal, particularly unsettling, is that it can never be complete. In Kristeva's words, 'the abject is something rejected from which one does not part' (1980: 4). The individuated subject always maintains an embodied connection with the pre-verbal authority of the abject maternal body.

Beyond the mother-child relationship in early developmental stages, considered within a broader context, abjection comes to signify all of the processes of expulsion that serve to maintain our bodily, and subjective boundaries. According to Kristeva scholar, S.K. Keltner, 'abjection is an ambiguous threshold both essential to and threatening of the tenuous individuation of the subject' (2011: 45). The expulsions of our bodies, be they bodily fluids, or visceral 'inner noises', are thus 'birthed', or abjected entities

that both challenge and (in their expulsion) serve to maintain the borders of the unified body, and the unified subject. Our 'horrifying' bodily emissions are relegated to the realm of the abject, that ever present reminder of the uncertainty of our position within the symbolic order. The negative, foreboding affects evoked by the abject are closely linked with those fearful, threatening qualities associated with the feminine in Western patriarchal cultures – the power of this abject 'horror' lies in its latent potential to dismantle a symbolic order that is undergirded by a necessary expulsion of the feminine. In Kristeva's oft-quoted words, the abject 'pulls us towards the point where meaning collapses' (1980: 3). For Kristeva, then, the abject can be interpreted as the body's insistent presence revolting against a repressive symbolic order, threatening to rupture patriarchal 'meaning'.

Returning to the discussion of Yoko Ono's extreme vocalisations, I would like to interpret these as abject sonic expressions. As a vocal expulsion unleashed from the deepest reaches of Ono's body, the scream points to a violent abjection that conjures the pangs of birth. Indeed, Ono has been quoted as referring to her vocalisations as inspired by her experiences in labour. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, critics frequently referred to Ono's vocal performances in terms of 'sickness, suffering, and unintelligibility', responding to a particularly disturbing quality identified therein (Woo, 2006: 280-281). Because of its subject matter that directly thematises motherhood, Ono's lament for her lost daughter, 'Don't Worry Kyoko (Mommy's Only Looking for Her Hand in the Snow)', provides an apt example of Ono's extreme vocal repertoire evoking processes of abjection. Ono's daughter, Kyoko, was abducted in 1969 by her father,

art promoter Anthony Cox. While the moment of birth and the subsequent early stages of development might be considered to be the time when mother and child develop an awareness of their abject bond, the mother's loss of a child later in life could be said to constitute a traumatic, secondary abjection – the intense corporeal bond between mother and daughter still lingers despite physical separation. Through abjection of the maternal, the symbolic order, or the law of the Father is reinforced; or, in Ono's case, the division between mother and daughter is perpetrated by the illegal intervention of Kyoko's biological father. The multiple vocal 'interiorities-in-process' that were previously discussed in the context of this vocal performance also point to a ruptured maternal body in crisis. As the abject grapples for a 'voice', she is met with a symbolic order guaranteed by her exclusion. The wavering, maniacal scream that ensues is one of desperation, horror, trauma – but most of all, it suggests the radical possibility of a sonic 'other' finding expression.⁵

The horror of the scream thus alerts us to a body in crisis, a body being ruptured, fragmented – a pre-verbal, transformative body that resists co-optation within the symbolic order. As Ono's screams twist in and out of comprehensible semiotic codes, we hear a sonic breakdown of her performative subjectivity, and the emergence of a bodily 'interiority-in-process'. Given the fear of the feminine that comes to be ascribed to the abject, Ono's vocal performances can be interpreted as a direct sonic challenge to the boundaries that anxiously prescribe and reinforce patriarchal order – the scream in this context thus marks a revolutionary, abject vocal expulsion.

The Scream in socio-historical context: 1960s revolutionary movements and rock and roll counterculture

In my discussion of Yoko Ono's experimental vocal works thus far, I have offered a possible means of theorizing her performances as 'revolutionary' from the perspective of Kristevan psychoanalytic critique; I would like to now take a step back from the more intimate processes of her vocal practice, to reflect upon her vocalisations as musical responses to the wider socio-cultural revolutionary movements of the 1960s. An avant-garde artist who crossed over into the world of rock and roll as John Lennon's musical partner, Yoko Ono assumed a highly public position in the late 1960s US popular cultural sphere, one that often resonated with the countercultural realms of underground music and youth culture. According to cultural historian and feminist critic, Marianne Dekoven, the late 1960s socio-cultural landscape was a highly transformative, dynamic terrain, characterised by a shift away from modernity towards a postmodern, post-industrial social framework. For Dekoven, the emergence of the postmodern marked 'the end of modernity's totalizing, grandly synthesizing utopianism... and the shift of modernity's democratizing, capitalist, and individualist impulses to a commercial, popular, populist, subjectivist, multiple and diffuse, unevenly critical or resistant, egalitarianism' (2004: xvi). Yoko Ono's entrance into the forefront of 1960s US music culture thus transpired at a time when the utopic, radical, revolutionary movements of the decade were at their peak – soon, however, these 'grandly synthesizing' modernist causes would give way to postmodern fragmentation and depoliticisation.

Initiating their experimental musical collaboration in 1968, the year that marked a critical, if not somewhat ominous turning point for 1960s countercultural movements, Yoko Ono and John Lennon emerged as a celebrity 'spokes-couple' for various contemporary causes such as the Anti-War Movement and the Women's Movement.⁶ Considering the various human rights campaigns that surfaced during the 1960s, one can say that this era in US history marked the entrance of formerly marginalised peoples into the hegemonic realm of national politics – the onset of the 'populist, subjectivist, multiple and diffuse' postmodern political landscape characterised by Dekoven. It is fitting, then, that Yoko Ono, a Japanese woman, would surface as a powerful public figure in the US at this historical moment. As the voices of formerly silenced, marginal social figures encroached upon the dominant order of middle-class white culture, however, the year 1968 witnessed the violent aftermath of the Summer of Love – race riots broke out across the eastern US, and wide-spread mistrust in the US government grew amongst the youth of the nation in response to the intensification of violence in Vietnam. In many ways the tumultuous political milieu of the late 1960s marked an historical moment of rupture. The fraught borderlines between self and other, center and periphery, white and black, man and woman, were now being called into question on a larger scale than ever before. The revolutionary political movements of 1960s US thus opened up a host of transformative social spaces, many of which were shaped by unfolding processes of rupture and abjection.

A politically-charged artist active within such a tumultuous, transformative era, Yoko Ono occu-

ped a liminal status as a woman who straddled two cultural spheres: that of avant-garde, or 'high' art, and rock and roll counterculture. To further complicate her position, Ono was often relegated to the margins of each of these disparate spheres of cultural production. As a member of the Fluxus conceptual art group in New York City, Yoko Ono faced a considerable amount of gender-based discrimination. In her own words:

"Being a woman and doing my thing in the [Fluxus] days was especially hard because I was a woman. Most of my friends were all male and they tried to stop me from being an artist. They tried to shut my mouth and tried to get me as an owner of the loft who helped in concerts" (Ono quoted in Woo, 232).

In the context of Fluxus, Ono's male colleagues thus persisted in viewing her as a *salonnière*-type figure within their art world instead of a bona fide artist in her own right. As a *Japanese* woman, Ono also faced the additional burden of being type-cast as a 'Zen' artist by contemporary art critics, despite the critical distance that she carefully maintained from such an artistic disposition. While Yoko Ono was indeed instrumental in introducing John Cage to Zen philosophy, within her artist's manifesto, 'The Word of a Fabricator' (1962), she clearly distinguishes her own artistic project from that of the Cageian, Zen-inspired artist. Likening Zen enlightenment to a 'plant-like' state, Ono declares that she has no desire to attain such a stultifying mode of artistic 'being'; instead, she proclaims that she will remain actively 'groping in the world of stickiness.' This disquieting image of the 'world of stickiness' evokes a space of the abject, a womb-like world coated in the sticky residue of life, its viscous borders blurring the boundaries of

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self and other. As a doubly marginal figure within the world of 1960s art, facing discrimination as a result of her racial and gender-based difference, Yoko Ono no doubt sorely felt the 'stickiness' of her abject situation.

Upon entering the world of rock and roll, however, Ono experienced a host of antagonistic reactions to her person and her musical work. While rock and roll promised liberation from the oppressive socio-cultural milieu of the post-war era, it was still a highly androcentric cultural sphere, which allowed relatively few women into its folds. Throughout the 1960s, the majority of women musicians continued to be objectified within popular music genres, often relegated to the role of the highly commodified pop singer. The general public, and the media's backlash against Yoko Ono no doubt stemmed from gendered and racial anxieties that were evoked as a result of an independent-minded, Asian woman asserting herself as equal to her partner, John Lennon, the 'hero' of the counterculture. As is often the case in transformative historical periods, we see that despite the winds of change blowing in a new direction, certain key aspects of the former 'regime' still linger. Nonetheless, within this countercultural milieu, Yoko Ono managed to actualise her experimental musical projects. Her strongest advocate was of course, John Lennon, who was convinced of the revolutionary potential of Ono's music; John proudly proclaimed that Ono's music was '20 years ahead of its time' (Gaar 1992: 233). Notably, countercultural publications of the day such as *Rolling Stone* magazine also strongly supported Ono's avant-garde rock and roll experimentations. The overwhelming majority of media publications, did, however, promote a negative view

of Ono, which caused the artist great anxiety, to the point where she claims she developed a slight stutter.

Yoko Ono thus occupied a contradictory position within the counterculture that was simultaneously both marginal *and* central. As John Lennon's collaborator, she was very much at the centre of the world of rock music; as an Asian woman whose musical practice was strongly influenced by the avant-garde, however, she remained a troublesome anomaly that could not be easily integrated into the androcentric, 'low-art' world of rock and roll. At a time when cultural and social roles were being challenged and redefined, Yoko Ono was a highly visible public figure who was simultaneously 'apart of' as well as 'expelled from' the identificatory categories of artist, musician, and rock star. Her cultural positioning was thus abject – and through re-enacting processes of abjection in her musical output, she was able to transform the reigning symbolic order that denied her inclusion within its folds. In historical hindsight, then, it can be said that Ono's abject, borderline cultural positioning perhaps rendered her a figure that was most keenly attuned to the transformative *Zeitgeist* of the times.

Throughout the course of their highly public careers, Yoko Ono and John Lennon were noted for their passionate involvement in contemporary revolutionary political movements, publicly advocating the end of the Vietnam War, and penning countless songs thematizing women's equality, social injustice, and the need for social change. In the aftermath of the Free Speech Movement (FSM) of 1964, youth cultural protests of the 1960s placed a great deal of importance on 'raising one's voice' to bring about revolutionary change – in the context of late 1960s counterculture, *vocalisation* was thus considered a

key means of social, cultural, and indeed, individual, liberation. As popular recording artists whose works were informed by revolutionary politics, Yoko Ono and John Lennon's musical output from this time was largely driven by a need to vocalise their desire for a better world. In this sense, the success of the FSM forged a powerful link between the vocalisation and the actualisation of utopic ideals in the minds of socio-cultural activists and artists in the 1960s.

According to historian M.J. Heale, public life in the late 1960s was characterised by a 'pervasive activism, and this energy was grounded in part in the realisation that the country was being fundamentally transformed' (2001: 9). This 'activism' was not restricted to the realm of politics; rather, it infused many contemporary US socio-cultural discourses. The transformative 'new sensibility' that Sontag identified in the art world could be characterised as one aspect of the 'activism' that pervaded US culture at the time. As well, the newly emergent discourse of humanistic psychology had a wide-reaching impact on 1960s US culture, promoting a positive view of the transformative potential of the individual (Heale, 2001: 15). The discourse of humanistic psychology no doubt influenced the youth counterculture of the day, for whom the desire for self-expression, and the expansion of one's consciousness, was paramount. In the 1960s US, the active drive towards social transformation was thus rooted in a widely held belief in the capacity for individual transformation.

The FSM can be considered a key, transformative historical moment that galvanised many US white middle-class youth to embrace political activism, and the power of political speech, or vocalisation. On October 1, 1964, a ban was enacted on political

activity at the Telegraph and Bancroft intersection on the Berkeley campus. This relatively small area was the center of political speech-making at Berkeley; on the afternoon of October 1st, however, a civil rights activist, Jack Weinberg, was arrested for violating the newly instituted campus ban. According to historian Max Heinrich, supporters of the FSM 'view[ed] the triggering events [of the student protests, such as the campus ban on political activity, and the arrest of Jack Weinberg] as a moment of 'truth' when the exploitative nature of power alliances in higher education became visible – and intolerable to anyone with a sensitive conscience' (1968: 4). The police car holding Jack Weinberg was soon surrounded by a mob of non-violent student protestors, whose fervor was brought to a head by student activist Mario Savio's impassioned speech delivered atop the roof of the police car. Reflecting on the importance of Savio's speech, historian Robert Cohen states that Savio's address to the crowd 'not only set the tone for the non-violent occupation of the administration building – which culminated in the largest mass arrest of students in American history – but also became the most famous oration in the early history of the New Left' (2002: 1). Although the FSM began as a liberal movement aimed at '... restor[ing] the traditional political values that had been destroyed by bureaucracy, consumerism, and conformity', in the aftermath of the FSM, the late 1960s saw an increasing radicalisation of public speech (DeGroot, 2008: 188). With the onset of the Vietnam War, and mounting racial tension within the nation, US students' grew increasingly disillusioned with their government, and the establishment in general. At such a time, the success of the FSM inspired the hope of a youth

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cultural revolution. Most importantly, the power of youth culture was consolidated in a dramatic oration delivered by a young student activist.

Mario Savio, however, was not the only orator who bravely vocalised his political convictions atop a police car on October 1st, 1964. Bettina Aptheker, a highly influential figure in the FSM protests, also mounted the historic police car on that day. Aptheker recounts her experiences as the only female student involved in the FSM as follows: '[it] was a moment of great personal liberation for me. It gave me a taste of power – not in the sense of power over but in the sense of self-empowerment' (2002: 131). The sight of Aptheker atop the infamous police car was broadcast across the nation, and had a powerful impact on many women viewers. Aptheker recalls that despite the progressive values espoused by the FSM, the movement remained male-dominated.

“[It] was men who dominated our meetings and discussions. Women did most of the clerical work and fund-raising and provided food. None of this was particularly recognised as work, and I never questioned this division of labor or even saw it as an issue!” (2002: 130)

Aptheker's incredulous exclamation point reveals the enormity of the social change that occurred between 1964 and 2002, the publication date of her article remembering the FSM. Despite the male-dominated constitution of the FSM, in climbing the police car, and having her voice heard, Aptheker inspired a generation of women to 'speak up and be heard' – her oration thus served as one of the many catalysts for the growth of the Women's Movement throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. The FSM thus laid the foundation for the successes of later political movements that gained momentum in the late 1960s;

moreover, the FSM marked a moment of historical rupture characterised by the emergence of the 'voice of the youth'. The Berkeley student riots served to reinforce the importance of free speech – and the need for *vocalisation* as a means of liberation from social oppression.

Several years after the success of the FSM, US psychiatrist, Arthur Janov, published his influential work, *The Primal Scream*, which spurred wide-spread interest in a unique mode of psychotherapy that hinged on the release of repressed feelings through the practice of screaming. Primal Therapy – or 'Scream' Therapy, as it came to be known – gained a great deal of popularity in the early 1970s, owing to the fact that numerous celebrities, including Yoko Ono and John Lennon, took part in this unconventional course of treatment. Janov's monograph, *The Primal Scream*, carefully outlines his mode of psychotherapy; his central contention is that neurosis is a side-effect of a culture that encourages its subjects to repress their emotions as a means of assuming the guise of controlled, adult social subjects. The release of the scream is thus an outpouring of unbridled feeling that Janov considers to be the dialectical opposite of neurosis and repression. Janov writes:

“Primal therapy is essentially a dialectical process in which one matures as he feels his childish needs, in which a person becomes warm when he feels coldness, in which one becomes strong when they feel weak, in which feeling the past brings one wholly into the present, and in which feeling the death of the unreal system brings one back into life. It is the reverse of neurosis, in which one is afraid and acts big, and continually acts out the past in the present.” (1970: 412)

The dialectical binaries that Janov defines suggest a dualistic structure of human consciousness; liberation from repression – the ultimate ‘maturation’ of the subject, in Janovian terms – is brought about when the two oppositional states of mind are brought into conflict, and the subject is able to synthesise a healthy balance between the two. The stimulus for this dialectical process is the scream, a ‘primal’ vocalisation that opens the floodgates to our childhood, pre-neurotic state.

Just as the FSM advocated the need for public speech, and political vocalisation as a means of combating social oppression, the contemporary psychotherapeutic practice of Primal Therapy also called for individuals to tap into an extreme, powerful vocality in order to ward off the strictures of a repressive social order. In the case of both the FSM and Primal Therapy, then, vocalisation is perceived as an extreme expulsion that holds the power to bring about transformation of society as well as the individual psyche. Reframed in Kristevan terms, the transformative potential of vocalisation can be considered the enunciative moment that brings about a ‘semiotic rupture’ of the symbolic order. As Mario Savio and Bettina Aptheker shout out to the masses of protestors, and as Yoko Ono unleashes primal screams for her lost daughter, vocalisation assumes a meaning beyond ‘giving voice to’ the symbolic, rather, vocalisation serves the function of redefining the parameters of the symbolic. According to such a Kristevan analysis, the transformative potential of the extreme vocalisation is rooted in the persistent presence of the abject body. As the source of the revolutionary, semiotic content, the body lingers in the scream that is expels; Yoko Ono’s extreme vocal music is a product of a cultural milieu that viewed vocalisation, and in particular, forms of abject vocali-

sation, as a means of bringing about a more harmonious re-ordering of society and the individual.

Conclusion

Considering the many avenues of inquiry that have yet to be thoroughly explored in relation to Yoko Ono’s musical oeuvre, my aim in this article is to raise certain key issues pertaining to her vocal performance, and the socio-historical context of said performance, in order to arrive at some useful insights for future feminist analysis. Abjection, in its Kristevan interpretation, is not a theoretical concept that can be explained in a few paragraphs; however, the enigmatic nature of this concept serves as a source of inspiration for those of us who are drawn to the more challenging pieces of music that colour the landscape of late twentieth century experimentation. The power of horror – of that which disturbs, and unsettles – ultimately rests in its capacity to suggest an alternative to the naturalised arbitrary, and in so doing, to allow us a momentary glimpse into (and respite from) the oppressive operations of a symbolic order. Because of her spirited urge to shout from the heart, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Yoko Ono produced a series of screams that linger in the popular soundscape as abject expulsions of a woman’s body. The horrors of this body come to symbolise ‘unspeakable’ aspects of material existence that tug at the boundaries of symbolisation, and thereby suggest the possibility of an alternate reality. As we engage with her vocalisations, and tackle the interpretation of that which defies meaning, is it possible that we, too, are transformed? In this way, Yoko Ono’s rock and roll revolution can only gain momentum from this point onward.

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Endnotes

1. The term 'Abject Art' is typically employed to refer to a tradition of radical performance art that involves the use of bodily fluids and excretions as a means of conveying the often disturbing processes of abjection. Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) articulates a theory of abjection that gained prominence within academia and experimental fine art scenes throughout the 1980s and 1990s. To briefly capsule Kristeva's psychoanalytic perspective, abjection refers to the cultural and linguistic processes of exclusion that function to expel and marginalise that which cannot be symbolised within a paternalistic economy of signification. In my discussion of Yoko Ono's extreme vocalisations, I hope to demonstrate that the unsettling 'screams' that Ono unleashes can be interpreted as abject vocal emissions that both disturb and challenge the listening audience.
2. As a pioneering conceptual artist active within both Japanese and New York art worlds, Yoko Ono's works aimed to challenge conventional notions of art and artistic experience. One of her most renowned feminist art works, *Cut Piece* (1964), required audience members to cut off a piece of the artist's garments, gradually exposing her nude body. *Cut Piece* invited audience participation in its realisation, and evoked a powerful feminist message concerning the role of women in society as objects of a male visual hegemony.
3. Sontag distinguishes 'high' and 'low' art in terms of the uniqueness of the art produced. In Sontag's view, traditional 'high' art was characterised by the artists' expression of their individual perspective, whereas 'low' art was marked by mass production and impersonality. Matthew Arnold's seminal work on 'high' art, *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), defines 'high' art as that which serves the purpose of elevating the morality of society. In contrast to Arnold's thesis, Sontag observes that the increasing tendency to incorporate modern technologies into all forms of art has resulted in a blurring of the boundaries between 'high' and 'low'. As avant-garde musics come to be more specialised and scientific, popular musics, too, seek inspiration in technological innovations.
4. In her seminal article on Yoko Ono, 'The Spirit of YES: The Art and Life of Yoko Ono' (2000), Alexandra Munroe observes that Yoko Ono's foundation in classical training directly contributed to her later revolutionary vocal style.
5. In applying a western feminist psychoanalytic framework to Yoko Ono's vocal works, one runs the risk of putting under erasure her unique cultural positioning as a borderline figure whose feminist music constitutes a response to both Japanese and Western forms of patriarchy. In order to augment my Kristevan analysis, in the context of my extended Dissertation project, I will provide a cross-cultural, comparative interpretation of Japanese and Western context, in this article I have chosen to focus on these works as responses to a Western paternalistic economy of signification.
6. Yoko Ono and John Lennon released *Unfinished Music No. 1: Two Virgins* in 1968. The work consisted of avant-garde tape music that was spliced together by Yoko and John over the course of a night-long acid trip. This work stands as one of the first instances of avant-garde musical practice being made available to the general public.