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Article abstract

This article analyzes a recent production of Samuel Beckett's play Not I performed by Jess Thom, a neurodiverse performer most well known by the moniker Touretteshero. Not I is a monologue of twisting and fragmented text revered for the physical, vocal, and emotional challenge it presents to performers and audiences alike. This article takes up the aesthetic, material, and sonic changes made to the play in the Touretteshero production, which serve to reimagine and reconstruct the "sonic profile" of the work. Together, these changes enact a crip aesthetic that illuminates the often-hidden exclusionary structures that permeate theatrical practice. Specifically, this article describes the material changes made to the production in the service of increased accessibility for performer and audience, how Thom's vocal tics interact with Beckett's already fragmented text, and how the production's integration of sign language interpretation extends how we conceptualize sound. Through this analysis, Thom's performance emerges as a revolutionary contribution to contemporary disability arts that reimagines the value of disability and the possibilities for sound in performance.

Sounding a Crip Aesthetic: Transforming the Sonic in Samuel Beckett's *Not I*

Megan Johnson

"Hedgehog. Biscuit. Cats. Biscuit. Fuck. Biscuit. Cats. Hedgehog. Biscuit . . . Biscuit. Biscuit. Fuck. Biscuit. Hedgehog. Biscuit-Biscuit-Biscuit-Biscuit-Biscuit . . . Biscuit-Biscuit-Biscuit. Biscuit. Oooh! Biscuit." As a shadowy figure is slowly raised into the air, these words ring out in an otherwise silent space. Suddenly, the words shift, though their jagged rhythm continues:

> . . . out . . . into this world . . . this world . . . tiny little thing . . . before its time. . . in a godfor- . . . what? . . . girl? . . yes . . . tiny little girl . . . into this . . . out into this . . . before her time . . . godforsaken hole called . . . called . . . no matter . . . parents unknown . . . In unheard of . . . he having vanished . . . thin air . . . no sooner buttoned up his breeches . . . (Beckett 1986, 378).

These lines are the opening phrases to Samuel Beckett's play *Not I* (1972), and they—along with the repeated words like "biscuit, biscuit, biscuit"—are spoken by UK-based performer Jess Thom, who presented Beckett's play at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2017 and then at Battersea Arts Centre in London the following year. *Not I* is a monologue of twisting and fragmented text delivered at high speed and without cessation and is a work known for the physical, vocal, and emotional challenge it presents to performers and audiences alike. While any performance of this play provides substantial fodder for performance scholarship, Thom's rendition is especially significant as she is the first disability-identified performer to take on the role. In her early twenties, Thom was diagnosed with Tourette's Syndrome—a neurological condition that often results in chronic repetitive and involuntary movements and sounds, called tics.[1] Thom's energy and natural performance instinct make her a memorable presence onstage—a presence further distinguished by her use of a wheelchair and consistent vocal and motor tics. Thom's vocal tics are an especially prominent feature of her personal and performance personas, with some reoccurring vocalizations (the word "biscuit," for example) becoming motifs in her artistic work.[2]

Thom often goes by the moniker "Touretteshero," which refers to her superhero performance persona and is also the name of the organization that she cofounded with long-time creative collaborator Matthew Pountney.[3] Through Touretteshero—which aims to "celebrate and share the creativity and humour of Tourette's in an accessible way" (Touretteshero)—Thom advocates for more diverse and inclusive arts practices for people with disabilities, a focus borne out of her own experiences of discrimination in the theatre. In interviews and public talks, Thom often recounts an experience attending a comedy show where, despite alerting both performer and audience to her presence prior to the show, her vocal tics were deemed disruptive, and she was removed from the audience at intermission and forced to watch the performance from the sound booth. Here, the sound booth was employed for its soundproofing capabilities, used as a means of erasing Thom's

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unexpected vocal tics from the performance space in order to maintain the expected etiquette of the "quiet audience" (Simpson 2018).

This story serves as an example of the ongoing ways that the sonic attributes of performance spaces are tightly controlled and adhere to specific conventions. It demonstrates how "line[s] of exclusion" (Johnston 2019, 21) between normative/nonnormative and acceptable/unacceptable sounds permeate performance spheres, and how, though lack of access is often imagined to be physical or structural, there are sonic spaces that are equally inaccessible. Even at a comedy show, where laughs, jeers, and feedback from the audience are expected, certain sounds and vocalizations fall outside what is deemed appropriate audience comportment. These demarcations around sonic normativity are upheld by ableist structures, practices, and attitudes that then materialize in the continued stigmatization and inaccessibility experienced by disabled performers and audience members.

Thom's frequent invocation of this story marks it as a profound experience that has fuelled her desire to make theatre spaces and practices more accessible and inclusive for performers and audiences (Disability Arts Online 2019).[4] Though she admits that the "experience of exclusion and discrimination . . . made me almost self-select away from theatre totally and turn away from theatre and feel that wasn't a place for me," she has since reclaimed this experience by putting herself onto the stage—the one space in the theatre where she would not be told to be quiet (ADIarts 2016). As a disabled performer taking on Beckett's *Not I*—a canonical work of modern drama with tightly regulated performance standards, a highly virtuosic text, and arduous physical demands on the performer—Thom makes a decisive intervention into the exclusionary patterns whereby sounds are delineated across lines of acceptability and unacceptability.

In what follows, I trace the aesthetic and material changes made to the play in the Touretteshero production, which, in welcoming a wider diversity of sounds into the theatre, work to metaphorically shatter the soundproof glass of the sound booth that would seek to (sonically) constrain nonnormative bodyminds.[5] Specifically, I explore the material changes made to the production in service of increased accessibility for performer and audience, how Thom's vocal tics interact with Beckett's already fragmented text, and the production's innovative integration of sign language interpretation. Together, these changes present a multisensorial experience that extends conceptualizations of what constitutes "the sonic" in performance and also reimagines and reconstructs what I describe as the "sonic profile" of Beckett's play. I elaborate on how these changes constitute a crip aesthetic—whereby artistic works reveal and resist the structures of compulsory ablebodiedness/ablemindedness—and argue that, in so doing, they both illuminate the exclusionary structures that permeate theatrical practice and signal the potential for more inclusive aesthetic approaches.

Disability Arts and Crip Aesthetics

Though disability is often featured in performance as a narrative or dramaturgical device—what Mitchell and Snyder (2000) describe as a "narrative prosthesis"—there continues to be a dearth of casting of disabled performers, particularly in canonical theatre works (Johnston 2016; Sandahl 2008). Beckett's prominence within the modern theatre canon and his status as "arguably, the twentieth-century's most important playwright" (Oppenheim 2004, 1) make Thom's performance a compelling contribution to the production history of the play and the landscape of contemporary disability arts.

The disability arts and culture movement, of which disability theatre and performance is one part, is an important way that disability communities have sought to "address and redress the very idea of disability in the modern arts and, by extension, society" (Johnston 2016, 15). Emerging in tandem and intersecting with the rise of disability activism in the late twentieth century, disability arts and culture champions disabled people as artistic and cultural producers, develops artistic work that rejects disparaging representations and stereotypes of disability, and advocates for increasing accessibility within arts institutions and practices. The movement has helped to coalesce diverse communities of practitioners, advocates, and spectators who seek to articulate experiences and narratives of disability in such a way as to rescript the many negative representations that perpetuate in dominant mainstream art, media, and culture. Though works of disability art often centre experiences of disability and impairment in their form, content, or approach, this need not always be the case. As Eliza Chandler describes, "disability is not always the subject of my art, but claiming myself as a disability artist . . . advances an understanding of myself and other disabled people as creative, political, and full of vitality" (2018, 459).

Chandler's positioning of disability arts practitioners as creative, political, and vital resonates with how we might understand crip aesthetics. In marshalling a crip aesthetic as part of the wider framing of disability arts practice, artists move beyond just centring disability onstage to using performance as a way of illuminating the oppressive power structures that undergird the projects of compulsory ablebodiedness/ablemindedness in both performance and broader social contexts. In this usage, "crip" is released from the pejorative connotation of the word "crippled" to become "a reclaimed word around which [people with disabilities] mobilize identity, community, culture, and scholarship" (Chandler 2019, 8)—the word signals practices of activism and resistance that "spi[n] mainstream representations or practices to reveal able-bodied assumptions and exclusionary effects" (Sandahl 2003, 37).

The crip aesthetic of artists and grassroots activists has helped to foment theorization on "crip" and the development of "crip theory" (Sandahl 2003; McRuer 2006, 2018; Kafer 2013; Fritsch 2016). Much of this work considers the relationship, affinities, and distinctions between queer theory and disability studies, particularly accounting for the way each field maintains a "radical stance toward concepts of normalcy" (Sandahl 2003, 26). Critique of the various models and modes of normativity that operate in social, cultural, and political life has been a central project in disability studies more broadly (Davis 1995; Garland-Thomson 1997) and acquires additional energy in how "*crip* and *queer* mark out, and indeed, flaunt the failures of normativity," explicitly defying dominant culture and dismantling the demarcations and structures of power that uphold normativity (Fritsch and McGuire 2018, vii).

Performance remains an important site for this dismantling. For example, Carrie Sandahl's early writing on crip theory is centred on the autobiographical work of performance artists who sought to claim their queer-crip identity and "expose the arbitrary delineation between normal and defective" (2003, 37). Sandahl describes how these artists used a crip approach to make visible the ableist practices and attitudes that structure performance but are often occluded by their apparent naturalness. I locate a similar impulse in how Thom's performance engages with Beckett's play in ways that expose the ableist structures upon which its performance practice is built. This is particularly interesting because although the aesthetic presented in *Not I* appears revolutionary in how it flouts and disturbs theatrical convention[6]—as Gontarski notes, "dispers[ing] the idea of the literary character and reassert[ing] the primacy of language on stage, of narrative and poetry" (2001, 169)—part of what the Touretteshero production choices make clear is how the play simultaneously

and paradoxically achieves this aesthetic because of its reliance on exclusionary structures. The structures that prevent the work from being inclusive to a diverse range of performers and audiences are illuminated when the play is approached and transformed through a crip aesthetic.

Sonic Profile

While there are various methods by which disabled performers might crip an existing aesthetic (Hadley 2014; Kelly and Orsini 2016; Millett-Gallant 2019), and though disability arts scholarship continues to attend to many of the ableist systems, practices, and ideologies that structure theatre and performance, what has not yet been fully considered are the ways that *sound* is imbricated in these structures. Part of the significance of Thom's performance of *Not I,* therefore, is how the changes made to the production enact a crip aesthetic that reconstitutes the sonic elements of the play, which is already known for presenting a unique aural experience. The play centres on the character of Mouth: a woman who (after years of silence) seems suddenly unable to stop speaking as she delivers a non-stop monologue of disjointed, stream-of-consciousness text filled with confusion, disassociation, and trauma. Mouth's voice is the only sound heard through the entirety of the play, and the torrent of sound that gushes forth from her is intense and unremitting. The audience must strain to comprehend, through the character's "furious venting of words" (Lawley 1983, 408), any semblance of narrative. Though the play does not provide much concrete information pertaining to Mouth's background or identity, an attentive listener can surmise that she was abandoned by both parents, has been unloved and alone for much of her life, and has up until this moment been unable or unwilling to speak.

In analyzing the play, many critics have highlighted the character's disconnected and fragmented sense of self (Brater 1974, 196; Lawley 1983, 411), an interpretation that is in part gleaned from Mouth's refusal to identify herself as the protagonist of the narrative—rather, she insists on relaying the story in the third person: "what she was– . . . what? . . who? . . no! . . she! . . SHE!" (Beckett 1986, 382). However, these interpretations are derived not only from the words of the text but also its sound; Mouth's halting and disconnected speech aurally emphasizes this fragmentation. This attention to the sonic highlights the import of sound as a key method by which theatrical worlds are created. In her formative essay "EF's Visit to a Small Planet," Elinor Fuchs encourages us to "listen for the pattern of the sound" within a play since "every dramatic world will have, or suggest, characteristic sounds" (2004, 7). Despite the centrality of sound and sound design in creating "dramatic worlds," however, it has lacked critical attention in theatre studies. As Susan Bennett describes, until recently, "theatre sound as a critical inquiry was long consigned to a background role, rarely doing more than support the main action of performance research" (2019, 7).

However, this is not to say that sound has been absent from critical discourse in performance research. My thinking around the sonic crip aesthetic in the Touretteshero production builds on performance studies scholarship that has drawn on sound, aurality, voice, and music as a method of challenging the hegemony of the visual as a mode of perception and the resulting epistemological assumptions. This work—evinced in writings by Fred Moten (2003), Alexandra Vazquez (2013), Tina M. Campt (2017), and others—engages with sound as a way of offering theoretical and methodological tools that find new routes into performance and its relationship to subjectivity, culture, history, and community. Rather than assert aurality in lieu of visuality in a hierarchy of sensory experience, these scholars ask what sound can open up for us when it is used as an entry

point into culture, aesthetics, and performance, and consider how including the sonic as a mode of sense perception can provide access to alternative (i.e., non-dominant) experiences and narratives.

Enlivened by the challenge these scholars have levied on the dominance of the visual, I use the term "sonic profile" as a means to summon an expansive understanding of what constitutes the sonic. In this figuration, sound is not only a singular object of analysis or a discrete event but also something that stretches across multiple sensory registers and is deeply linked to material context. Attending to the multisensorial nature of a play's sonic profile disrupts the tendency to elevate one sensory modality over another and instead acknowledges the potential of the sonic to be constitutive of a combination of sensory experiences and abilities (Cachia 2019c; Kochhar-Lindgren 2006b). This term is meant to encapsulate the aural sounds of a performance as well as the concurrent confluence of visual, spatial, temporal, kinaesthetic, and/or material elements. From this vantage point, the crip aesthetic of the Touretteshero production can be located in its transformation of the aural elements of Beckett's play *and* the production's visual and material adaptations. Some of the adaptations made by the production (such as presenting the play as a relaxed performance) frame the context in which the play is "heard," while others (such as the casting of Thom in the role of Mouth and the integration of sign language interpretation) shift the content of the performance itself. Together, these myriad changes work to reconstruct the overall sonic profile of the play—opening up exciting aesthetic possibilities for future presentations of *Not I* while also signalling the ways that sound has been used as a means of enacting and reinforcing lines of exclusion around nonnormative bodyminds.

"Beckett with Biscuits"

People with disabilities are often excluded from performance settings because they are simply not imagined or expected to be there (Conroy 2019, 47; Lobel and Thom 2019, 248). When performers, crew, administration, and patrons are all assumed to be nondisabled, the inaccessible aspects of a theatre's space or a performance's content are more easily occluded, and the ableist structures within performance practice remain unremarkable. Thom's performance in the Touretteshero production, in contrast, imagines a greater diversity of bodyminds (and voices) within the scope of the play and makes explicit the tenets of diversity, inclusion, and accessibility. The changes made to the play by this production in order to enact this inclusive ethos are particularly significant given that the Beckett estate is notorious for refusing performance rights to producers who cannot adhere to the playwright's exact stage directions or who wish to revamp the playwright's material in some way.[7] The estate's strict control over the presentation of Beckett's work means that his plays are usually presented within a relatively narrow margin of difference across productions.[8] In this case, the unpredictability of Thom's vocal tics meant that she would not be able to perform Beckett's text exactly as written. And yet when Thom appealed to Edward Beckett (the playwright's nephew) to express her desire to perform the play, she was granted performance rights even though it was clear that, in Thom's words, her rendition would be "Beckett with Biscuits" (Fox 2017). Agreeing to Thom's "Beckett with Biscuits" version of *Not I* meant that the Beckett estate greenlit a production of the play that would be (sonically) distinct from every previous rendition. Securing access to the performance rights was the first crack Thom and her team made in the metaphorical soundproof glass of the sound booth that had previously separated nonnormative bodyminds and voices from this seminal work of twentieth-century drama.

A second crack in the metaphorical glass that also dramatically reshaped the sonic profile of the play was the production's adherence to relaxed performance protocols. Relaxed performance—a foundational part of Thom's advocacy work[9]—refers to the act of making certain (technical, spatial, or attitudinal) modifications to accommodate a diverse cross-section of audience members. This practice acknowledges that many of the codes and conventions that structure performance (for example, the requirement to remain seated and silent throughout) present barriers to diverse bodyminds. It responds by seeking to make performances and performance spaces as accessible, inclusive, and welcoming as possible.[10] Unlike the discrimination that Thom experienced in response to her tics at the comedy show she attended, relaxed performances embrace the possibility that audiences might move, enter or exit the performance space, or vocalize in some way. The approach "invites bodies to be bodies" and opens up the theatre by "breaking down physical, attitudinal, sensory, financial, and other barriers [so that] the theatre space becomes an entirely different experience" (LaMarre, Rice, and Besse 2019, 7). Relaxed performances alter the sonic profile of performances because they reimagine and remake the entire sensory experience. The material and attitudinal adjustments made in these settings anticipate a wider diversity of sensory capacities and preferences and allow for the possibility of an array of audible contributions from the audience. This adds to theatre's inherent liveness and responsivity (Lobel and Thom 2019, 248), reframing how the play is "heard" by spectators in the context of its performance. By cripping the performance space through relaxed performance protocols, Thom's rendition of the play transforms the sonic experience of the performance and draws attention to the ideological framings of ableism that are made manifest through the material, spatial, and sonic configurations of theatre spaces.

The Crip Aesthetics of Touretteshero's *Not I*

Alongside the metaphorical cracks in the soundproof glass that I have highlighted thus far—casting Thom in the role of Mouth and using relaxed performance protocols—there were also material changes made within the production itself that served to shift the sonic profile of the work. These changes likewise enact a crip aesthetic by revealing how some staging and performance approaches in theatre, when left unquestioned, can exclude a diverse range of embodiments.

The fragmented nature of the play text is echoed in the staging of the play, with the stage directions dictating that only the performer's mouth be visible and that it appear suspended in space eight feet above the stage. This leads to the visual of a disembodied, floating orifice that has been described as "one of the most disturbing stage images of twentieth-century theater" (O'Gorman 1993, 32). This visual absenting of the performer's body is one way the play is understood as defying theatrical convention—Mouth evades the presence and solidity that would ordinarily accompany theatrical characters, which prevents her subjectivity from ever being fully located.[11] The methods used to achieve the effect of a floating mouth warrant further attention. In most productions, the performer is positioned on an eight-foot rostrum and hidden behind a wall or curtain that obscures their body, with a small hole in this covering that allows only their mouth to be visible to the audience. A tight spotlight is then trained on the performer's mouth, which requires that they remain extremely still throughout the performance to ensure their mouth remains lit. Remaining immobile while delivering a text of such intensity and speed has proven so challenging that many performers have physically restrained themselves to prevent any involuntary movement. For example, Lisa Dawn achieved the effect by sticking her face into a wooden board and using head straps and a metal bar to hold her head and body in place, literally disabling herself by methods that are reminiscent of the practices of restraint, confinement, and institutionalization that have been forced on people with disabilities for

centuries (Ben-Moshe, Chapman, and Carey 2014). Enduring a similar setup, Billie Whitelaw recounts the "rehearsal agonies" that accompanied her preparation for the role and the lasting physical trauma she sustained from performing the play for two seasons (1996, 125, 131), including "damaging neck tension, hyper-ventilation, and extreme disorientation" (Worth 2001, 53). The binding of the female performer's body in an effort to achieve a specific aesthetic has become an assumed practice for the play—a brutal and misogynistic physical practice but one often valorized for garnering emotional intensity.[12]

For Thom, who uses a wheelchair and for whom maintaining this level of immobility is not possible, adaptations to the traditional staging were needed to achieve the intended visual effect. The production team designed a lift that could accommodate Thom's wheelchair to safely raise her eight feet above the ground. Rather than being hidden behind a curtain or board, Thom's form is obscured by a lack of lighting and entirely black costuming. Instead of the typical lighting set-up of a spotlight fixed on the performer's stationary mouth, Thom wears a dark hood that holds a small light directed downwards. This means her mouth remains illuminated as per Beckett's directives even as her head and body shift. Though this change still evokes the intended effect of the floating mouth, there is some marginal spill from the light that makes Thom's physical form more visible and works to reestablish Mouth's subjectivity (something further developed through Thom's vocal tics, which I discuss below).

Thom sought an equally "rigorous presentation" of the play in a way that "honour[ed] that text and the stage directions" (quoted in Simpson 2018, 10), and yet the crip aesthetics engendered by these changes are critical for how they draw attention to the exclusionary and ableist staging practices traditionally associated with the play. The production achieves Beckett's desired aesthetic effect but does so in a way that acknowledges and reminds us that the usual (and seemingly unquestioned) methods of achieving this effect are (at best) not universally accessible and are (at worst) physically damaging. The Touretteshero production prioritized accessibility in a way that exposed the exclusionary practices that have accompanied the aesthetic of the play and simultaneously refused to allow the production to perpetuate practices that enact control and domination over women and people with disabilities.

Further, framing these staging amendments as part of a crip aesthetic materializes a more complex consideration of what it means for disabled performers to access canonical performance works that have histories of ableist content or production practices.[13] In such cases, the objective may not be to merely obtain "access" to these works, but rather the chance to rethink all aspects of how these works are engaged with. In one review of the production, Jonathan Heron gestures toward this by noting that Thom's performance "articulates an alternative future for Beckett's theatrical aesthetics" in how she "recovers the role [of Mouth] not only for dis/abled bodies, but also for communal wellbeing and inclusion" (2018, 284, 287). Juxtaposing Thom's production choices against the physically agonizing practices undertaken by performers like Whitelaw and Dawn allows us to sense the literalness of Heron's choice of the word "wellbeing." Thom recovers the role of Mouth as a disabled performer, as Heron suggests, and also reveals the ableist structures within the play and theatre writ large that necessitate such recovery.

Text and Tics: Intercorporeality and Temporality

Although I contend that the sonic profile of a performance is comprised of more than strictly sound-based elements, this is not to disregard the ways that the aural aspects of *Not I*—that is, the text and the performer's voice—are also integral to the play's sonic profile. Indeed, the erratic and elliptical nature of Beckett's text is one of the primary markers of the play's overall aesthetic. There is a productive interplay between Beckett's text and Thom's vocal tics, and the relationship between the two emerges as a unique and important contribution to the performance's sonic profile and the production's crip aesthetic in two significant ways. Firstly, Thom's vocal tics presence her as a performer in a way that counteracts the invisibility of the character of Mouth and also foregrounds the lived materiality of disability, and secondly, Thom's tics shift the temporality of the play. These shifts not only impact the play's sonic profile but also contribute to a crip aesthetic by counteracting the overreliance on disability as a narrative device and exposing the temporal norms that often constrain diverse speech patterns.

In addition to the ways the play eschews visual theatrical conventions by obfuscating the body of the performer, it also seeks to break with sonic theatrical conventions. The disjointed and elliptical nature of the monologue (and the speed at which performers are encouraged to recite it) make the play "an unintelligible verbal onslaught" where the sensory experience is dominated by a wall of sound consisting of frantic and almost unceasing oration (Brater 1974, 189). Rather than staging a coherent sonic experience consisting of a discernible text emanating from a locatable onstage presence, *Not I* disrupts convention by presenting a sonic experience awash in confusion and unintelligibility.[14]

Despite this visual absence and sonic unintelligibility, Thom's tics assert her presence as a performer through their audible presence in the text. The sonic presence of Thom's tics diminishes the acousmatic characteristic present in other renditions of the play—where the source of the sound is visually obscured—and fundamentally shifts the audience's aural engagement with the text.[15] Mouth is no longer a disembodied voice that could be attached to any/body and therefore is attached to no/body. In listening to Thom, the audience becomes attuned to how the play text is bound up in relationship to the performer's voice and body; that text, voice, and body co-constitute each other.

Thom's tics are neither fully integrated nor completely separate from the play text. In part, the staccato rhythm of the text allows Thom's vocal tics to stylistically "fit" within the play's aesthetic. At the same time, because Thom introduces herself to the audience at the top of the show (a common protocol in relaxed performances), spectators are aware of her vocal tics and are able to distinguish them from Beckett's text. There is an intercorporeality that becomes apparent as Thom's tics insert themselves in and around Beckett's words: text and tics exist in tandem and become remade in relation to one another. As Thom describes: "what's interesting is, which took me by surprise, is that putting that monologue through my body and through my mouth—biscuit—somehow displaces some of the vocal tics a little bit. So they simplify—biscuit—and they're usually just 'biscuit'" (Robinson 2018, 45:40). The materiality of Thom's voice shifts Beckett's text at the same time as the playwright's words impact Thom's experience of voicing. This corporeal reciprocity evokes Mladen Dolar's assertion that even as the voice exits the body—"detached itself from its source, emancipated itself"—it nonetheless "remains corporeal" (2006, 73).

The presence evoked by Thom's tics affirms Mouth's subjectivity and thereby dismantles univocal readings of the character as absent, fragmented, or lacking agency. This reassertion of subjectivity through presence is especially significant if we consider Mouth to be a disabled character, as Thom did when she first read the play. Thom notes that she immediately understood Mouth as a disabled character because "she experiences barriers because of how her body and mind work" (Robinson 2018, 10:30). Given that, Mouth's visual absence from the stage can be read as perpetuating the paradoxical legacy of in/visibility with regards to disability and performance, whereby representations of disability proliferate in theatre, performance, and literary spheres, but the political, material, and embodied realities of disabled people often remain absent (Lewis 2006; Mitchell and Snyder 2000). Similarly, Ato Quayson observes that "despite the abundance of figures with physical and mental impairments and mobility difficulties in [Beckett's plays]," Beckett scholars rarely account for the phenomenological or material realities of disability in their analysis (2007, 55–56). Instead, Quayson argues, disability becomes "assimilated to a variety of philosophical categories in such a way as to obliterate the specificity of the body and to render it as a marker of something else" (2007, 56).[16]

In contrast, Thom developed her connection to Mouth through an awareness of their shared lived experience, highlighting an experience of disability that is lived and corporeal, not philosophical. For instance, in interviews, Thom highlights how Mouth's line "whole body like gone" directly describes the full-body spasms that Thom frequently experiences, often without warning. So too do Mouth's references to the sensation of buzzing ("the buzzing? . . . yes . . . all the time the buzzing") and "mouth on fire" point to the physical sensations that accompany Thom's tics, which she describes in noting that "what people often don't think about with Tourette's is the physical sensation of tics . . . "mouth on fire"—I know what that means" (Robinson 2018, 9:48). This connection also becomes evident in how Thom asserts her materiality by cripping Beckett's text via her own disabled speech: the sonic presence of Thom's vocal tics foregrounds her bodily presence and asserts the particularity and individuality of Mouth's experience, preventing disability from remaining a "narrative prosthesis" in the play, and instead transforms the way Mouth's narrative is heard (Mitchell and Snyder 2000).

Thom's vocal tics further shift the play's sonic profile in how they temporally displace Beckett's text. They link the rhythm of the play to her individual embodiment, and a temporal adjustment occurs as the vocal tics take up space in Thom's performance and hold the potential to literally extend the length of the text. The length of *Not I*, which is directly impacted by the verbal acuity of the performer, has long been a point of interest for critics and audiences and is one of the primary reasons that the work is considered a formidable challenge for any performer who undertakes it (McCarthy 1990, 455–56). The play ranges in duration depending on the performer's vocal velocity. The speed of the text delivery characteristic to the play can be traced to Billie Whitelaw's well-known 1972 performance of the role, directed by the playwright.[17] Corey Wakeling notes that the delivery speed was "contrary to the acting methodologies popular at the time" (2015, 93) and observes that Beckett's emphasis on voice over text within both the narrative and compositional structure of the play seems to have foreseen a kind of extra-linguistic postdramatic aesthetic (96–97). Whitelaw performed it in fourteen minutes, while Dawn's more recent performance clocked in at a blisteringly fast nine minutes (Masters 2013). Thom's performances fall in between, running about twelve minutes long.

Speaking the text at a high velocity and without missteps have "become aesthetic cues for incarnating Beckett in performance" (Wakeling 2015, 105). How, then, might the extreme verbal

acuity associated with Beckett's work be read as a barrier for voices that are excluded for "not performing within normative parameters" (St. Pierre 2015, 60)? As Joshua St. Pierre reminds us, "parameters of how fast, evenly, and clearly bodies can speak—and are expected to speak—are generated from so-called basic similarities that reflect the dominant able-bodied mode of temporal existence" (53). These modes, he goes on to argue, are straight, masculine, and decidedly heteronormative. The disabled speaking body, however, often presenting "awkward pauses, gaps in signification, and stuttered syntax," disrupts the hegemony of straight-masculine time and thereby "makes temporal movement viscous" (St. Pierre 2015, 54, 55).

Alongside notions of queer time (Edelman 2004; Freeman 2010; Muñoz 2009; Halberstam 2005), scholars have described how crip time exists outside of normative and linear temporalities (Kafer 2013; Price 2011, 62–63; Samuels 2017). Queer/crip time disturbs the linear and future-orientated march of normative time and forces a reconsideration of how embodied experience produces varying conceptions of time, pace, and scheduling (Kafer 2013, 27). Thom's performance conjures a sense of crip time as part of its crip aesthetic. The temporal displacement that Thom's tics provide crip Beckett's text through their erratic and unpredictable temporal patterns and make audible an alternative temporal rhythm within the play that would otherwise remain occluded. As St. Pierre notes, "straight time is . . . rendered conspicuous only through disruption: in this case, via stalled or 'fractured' speech" (2015, 59). Consequently, since time is "consubstantial with sound" (Solomos 2018, 97), Thom's tics, through their potential temporal impact on the length of the play, influence and hold the possibility of reshaping the sonic profile of the work. Further, if "the disciplinary power of hegemonic temporalities lies primarily in obscuring its contingency" (St. Pierre 2015, 62), then Thom does more than disrupt the temporality of the piece: she also exposes the contingency of temporal norms through her verbal engagement with the text and thereby evokes a core component of crip aesthetics in how she foregrounds structures that would otherwise remain unmarked.

Access Aesthetics

The final element of Thom's crip aesthetic I want to address is the production's integration of sign language interpretation. In addition to the Mouth, *Not I* features one other character: the non-speaking role of Auditor, who is present as the silent witness to Mouth's verbal outpouring. Described in the play's stage directions as hooded, "fully faintly lit," and existing as "a tall standing figure, sex undeterminable," Auditor stands alongside the floating, disembodied visual of Mouth, remaining stationary throughout the show save for four gestures of "helpless compassion" during which they raise their arms slightly to the side in response to Mouth's narrative. The Touretteshero production took advantage of this secondary character by having Charmaine Wombwell, a British Sign Language (BSL) interpreter, play the role while simultaneously interpreting the play's text.[18] Thom's tics are also interpreted, meaning that Wombwell's performance of the scripted BSL is partly improvised and must remain responsive to Thom's vocal interjections. By integrating BSL interpretation in this way, Thom's rendition of the play not only provides an important access component, but also expands the relationship between Mouth and Auditor and shifts the sonic profile of the play by extending the auditory elements of the work into a visual and kinaesthetic sphere.

Scholars have offered various interpretations of the role of the Auditor, positing the character as judge (Worth 1986, 171), corrective force (Zeifman 1976, 41), and even as goad to Mouth's narrative (Brater 1974, 197). Katherine O'Gorman's feminist reading of the role highlights how the placement

of Auditor dictated by Beckett's stage directions—"shown by attitude alone to be facing diagonally across stage intent on Mouth"—works to symbolically position Auditor as representative of the "masculine structure of seeing" (1993, 34). Auditor observes Mouth with a "scopic aggression," thereby situating Mouth in the role of the given-to-be-seen female other (O'Gorman 1993, 41). In the Touretteshero production, however, Wombwell's integration reconstitutes the dynamic between the two characters. Mira Felner notes how Wombwell's position and full visibility onstage transform the performance from a solo monologue into a duet and make Wombwell into a visual metaphor for Mouth, who has finally found her voice (2019, 12). Similarly, Derval Tubridy describes how Wombwell's gestures emerge in response to Thom's voice, where, rather than remain a silent witness to Mouth's words, Auditor's gestures of "helpless compassion" are subsequently "transformed . . . into a gesture of translation, communication and correspondence between protagonist (Mouth) and audience through [the interpreter's] body" (2018, para. 3). Wombwell faces the audience and gestures in fluid response to Mouth's text, a dynamic that undoes the silent dominating gaze and looming corrective presence of Auditor that O'Gorman describes. By casting Wombwell in the role, the production "is unusual in giving the Auditor an inner life . . . and giving the role some agency"—the duo becomes linked in a way that is more akin to other "Beckettian 'pseudo couples' . . . like Didi and Gogo [*Waiting for Godot*], Hamm and Clov, Nagg and Nell [*Endgame*], Winnie and Willie [*Happy Days*]" (Heron 2018, 286).

This conflation of casting and interpretation serves to undo the conventional way that sign language interpretation is often provided in performance. Here the interpretation becomes theatricalized as a deeply embedded aesthetic element of the production, rather than remaining a purely functional access mechanism set off to one side of the stage. Like many of the other changes made to Thom's rendition of the play, this is an example of how "access aesthetics"—the integration of access protocols at all stages of the creative process—can be a powerful way to transform performance.[19] There is a balance to be struck here, since the heavy aestheticization of sign language interpretation can cause problems of intelligibility, thereby reducing its function as an access protocol (Kochhar-Lindgren 2006b, 106). However, the unintelligible nature of the play text means that, in the context of this performance, unintelligibility within the BSL *is itself a kind of access*. Though the structural and linguistic differences between English and BSL mean that Wombwell's gestures are not a direct translation of the text, the interpretation transposes the aural, temporal, and affective sense of Mouth's monologue into a kinaesthetic register.

Expanding the Sonic

The production's intertwining of the role of the Auditor and the sign language interpreter is also significant for how it encourages a rethinking of the connection between visual, aural, and haptic elements of sound. As noted, a performance's sonic profile includes its many aural aspects (sound design, underscore, spoken text, etc.) but equally considers how nonauditory aspects (space, staging, bodies, technology, visual images, narrative, etc.) contribute to the resultant soundscape. This expansive perspective of the sonic helps to loosen the strict divide between the sensory experiences of hearing and seeing—perhaps uncovering "zones of productive articulation" across "ocular-" and "phono-" centric divides (Friedner and Helmreich 2012, 2)—and also situates sound within a broader sensory, material, and social context. Marked divisions between vision and hearing as sensory experiences with distinct attributes—what Jonathan Sterne describes as the "audiovisual litany" (2012, 9)—fail to account for the diversity and continuum of sensory experience and serve to elevate some sense experiences and abilities over others. Crucially, these "cultural prenotions about

the senses (prejudices, really)" become foundational assumptions that shape theories of vision, audition, and general sense perception (Sterne 2012, 9).

As Wombwell gestures responsively to Thom's speech, these "cultural prenotions" are productively unmade. Wombwell's performance adds a sonic layer to Beckett's play that is multisensorial; uniting the visual, gestural, corporeal, and tactile sensations of sound and thereby making manifest Friedner and Helmreich's call for "zones of productive articulation" between hearing, deafness, and seeing (2012, 2). This shift crips the aesthetic of the play by dissolving the divide between vision and sound and moving instead toward productive reimaginings of the sensory makeup of the sonic as awash in multiplicities. Wombwell's gestures punctuate and reinforce the text, emphasizing Thom's voice on an embodied level and transforming the play's sonic profile by bringing Mouth's voice into another register beyond only the auditory. In this way, the production asks that we listen to the play differently: attending to the corporeal dimension of the play's text and reconsidering how we understand and conceive of the limits of sound.

Thinking of crip aesthetics through the lens of the sonic foregrounds that nothing about the sonic or the auditory is neutral. At the level of the individual, Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren notes the reciprocal nature by which sound practices are reinforced, asserting that "specific sound practices produce the normative modern subject, and, in turn, the modern subject reifies certain sound practices in order to maintain its putative stability" (2006a, 417). Sterne maintains a similar stance from a more macro perspective, contending that "every field of sonic practice is partially shaped by a set of knowledges of sound that it motivates, utilizes and operationalizes . . . We must not automatically take any discourse about sound in its own terms, but rather interrogate the terms upon which it is built. We must attend to the formations of power and subjectivity with which various knowledges transact" (2012, 9).[20] In other words, the sounds we encounter, how we experience them, and how we understand them cannot be conceived as merely neutral building blocks borne of sensory experience but rather must be understood as being constructed through particular power dynamics, subjectivities, and epistemological framings. Conventions of sound in theatre and performance must also be acknowledged as existing within and contributing to wider frames of what constitutes normative sound. Attending to the sonic provides an avenue for unearthing structures that may serve to perpetuate damaging ableist assumptions or behaviours.

Though *Not I* is a play that already disrupts theatrical and sonic conventions through its fragmented text, minimalist staging, and acousmatic speaker, it nevertheless relies on a host of exclusionary practices in order to enact this particular aesthetic. Thom's rendition of this play draws attention to and disrupts these exclusionary practices through a crip aesthetic that reimagines who is invited into performance spaces. This approach enacts material, aesthetic, and attitudinal changes which ultimately reconstruct the sonic profile of the play and encourage the audience to listen to it differently. Thom's performance of *Not I* prioritizes diversity, access, and inclusion and presents disability as generative, creative, and full of potential: a difference that is to be *desired* (Kafer 2013; Fritsch 2015; McRuer 2006; Sandahl 2003). The production does not apologize for the ways that it transforms Beckett's play but rather encourages a reimagining of how diverse bodyminds (and voices) might reconstitute performance in new and exciting ways.

In McRuer's writing on crip theory, he describes cripping as a mode of "collectively transforming" ableist and heteronormative systems in service of "imagining bodies and desires otherwise" (2006, 32). Thom's performance enacts this collective transformation of the many theatrical conventions that remain exclusionary and inaccessible to a diverse range of performers precisely because it

imagines bodies and desires otherwise. Thom's integration of relaxed performance protocols visibly displays her activism and commitment to supporting people with disabilities in becoming both consumers and producers of arts and culture. She continues to pioneer a form of accessible theatre, which "means that you imagine your audience to be as wide a group of people as possible, anticipating that they will use the communicational apparatus of theatre in potentially different ways" (Conroy 2019, 47). So too is Thom's activism exemplified in more subtle ways through the crip aesthetic at work in *Not I*: the embodied presence and temporal rhythm evoked through her vocal tics, the staging and costuming changes, and the integration of sign language interpretation into the aesthetic of the play. Through a crip aesthetic, the Touretteshero production reimagines and reconstructs the sonic profile of Beckett's play and provides us with a multifaceted sensory experience. Beyond only changes to the play's aural elements, this production encourages a complete reconceptualization of how we experience sonic worlds in theatre and performance and emerges as an important contribution to contemporary disability arts.

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Notes

1. In this article, I use the terms Tourette's Syndrome and Tourette's interchangeably. I also use both person-first language ("people with disabilities") and identity-first language ("disabled people").

2. Thom has written a book on her experience of Tourette's titled *Welcome to Biscuit Land – A Year in the Life of Touretteshero* (2012), and in 2014 she co-created (alongside puppeteer Jess Mabel Jones) a theatre piece titled *Backstage in Biscuit Land*. This show, which premiered at the 2015 Edinburgh Fringe Festival and later toured internationally, also became part of a three-day interactive performance installation at the Tate Modern in 2017.

3. Pountney also directed Thom's performance of *Not I*.

4. Thom's intention to improve disabled people's access to artistic and cultural spheres resonates with scholarship that addresses, for example, the rarity of casting disabled actors in films or canonical theatre works (Davis 2017; Johnston 2016; Sandahl 2008), the lack of opportunities for people with disabilities in performance training programs (Lewis 2010; Sandahl 2005), disparaging cultural representations of disability (Garland-Thomson 1997), and the inaccessibility of many performance spaces (Sandahl 2002).

5. I draw the term bodymind from Margaret Price (2015, 269), as a way of recognizing the entangled nature of body and mind.

6. While some have heralded Beckett's aesthetic and its singular focus on voice and actor as an exciting distillation of theatre's most essential elements (Worthen 1983, 415), others bemoan the fact that by removing nearly all familiar theatrical elements, Beckett "topples one by one the stones that have held the edifice [of theatre] together" (Barish 1981, 458).

7. Cross-gender casting, for example, was recently at issue with a Two Planks and a Passion Theatre Company in Nova Scotia, Canada. The company cancelled their production of *Waiting for Godot* after realizing that they would, according to a legal rider in the play's licensing rights, be unable to consider all-gender

casting the show. The rider states that "male actors shall play male roles" and "female actors shall play female roles" (Parsons 2019).

8. Some notable exceptions exist, such as a 2007 production of *Endgame* by Theatre Workshop Scotland that included disabled actors. For a discussion of this show, see Johnston (2016, 101–6).

9. In recent years, Touretteshero has been consulting with Battersea Arts Centre on relaxed performance practices, and in January 2020, it was announced that in response to this work, the Centre had become the world's first fully relaxed venue (Gardner 2020).

10. Standard relaxed performance protocols include providing introductions, touch tours, or visual stories prior to the performance, modifying intense light and sound effects, allowing audiences to make noise, move, and enter/depart the theatre space as needed, and providing a separate "chill out" space outside of the theatre for those in need of a place to decompress.

11. The fragmentation of the play's text and Mouth's seeming inability to coherently describe herself and the narrative of her life has, for some feminist scholars, represented the inability of women to locate themselves within the symbolic order of phallocentric language—a reading that is further supported by the visual absenting of the (female) performer's body (O'Gorman 1993; Wilson 1992).

12. See, for example, Katherine Worth's description of Whitelaw's performance: "though one couldn't wish such agonies on any future player, I have always felt that they must have taken Whitelaw's performance to a higher power than could be generated in one less rigorously set up" (2001, 53).

13. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer who offered this astute observation.

14. This experimentation with sound appears to have suited Beckett; he is quoted as saying that he hoped the play would "work on the nerves of the audience, not its intellect" (Brater 1974, 200).

15. Acousmatic listening, or reduced listening, is often framed as an aesthetic orientation toward sound that attempts to access a sound's intrinsic properties without attention to its source. For further discussion, see Pierre Schaeffer's *Treatise on Musical Objects* (1966/2017) and Michel Chion's *Guide to Sound Objects* (1983/2009). Brian Kane's approach to acousmatic sound in *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice* (2014), which aims to relocate acousmatic listening within historical and cultural contexts, may also be of interest to the reader. Susan Bennett notes that Beckett, who lived in Paris for most of his adult life, would have been aware of Schaeffer's work and his theory of acousmatic listening (2019, 78).

16. For further readings on disability in connection to Beckett's work, see Davidson (2007), Levin (2018), Johnston (2016), and Maude (2016).

17. No exact speed for the text is listed in the stage directions, but Whitelaw notes that she felt that the play "would have to go . . . as fast as the speed of thought" (1996, 118).

18. The BSL interpretation was developed in consultation with Deaf theatre maker Deepa Shastri.

19. For further discussion on the term, see Cachia (2019a, 2019b), Johnson (2019), and Johnston (2016).

20. Even (seemingly benign) sound-reproduction technologies, as Sterne has shown elsewhere, emerge from specific historical understandings of sound and audition. For example, the central contributions of the Deaf and hard of hearing to the development of sound technologies are often erased from the historical narrative (Mills 2010, 39), and theories of audition are often developed by imagining a normative subject with "whole, undamaged hearing" that fails to account for the range of phenomenological sonic experience (Sterne 2012, 8).

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