

**On the Problem and Promise of Alex Caldiero's Sonosophy:
Doing Dialogical Coperformative Ethnography;
Or, Enter the Poetarium**

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A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Idaho State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
English and the Teaching of English

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1 May 2017
Pocatello, ID

For Alex
“When the apple is ripe, it falls.”

For Jess, Sidney, Alex, Hadley, and Jaylee:
my breath and language and life

Acknowledgements

I owe a tremendous debt to the members of my dissertation committee, each of whom have made me a better scholar and human being and without whom my ethnography wouldn't be what it is. My readers, Dr. Susan Goslee and Dr. Nancy Legge, offered generous insights at various stages in the project that helped me develop my methodology and clarify my interpretive lens. Dr. Goslee's astute readings of my project proposal, my comprehensive exam essays, and an in-process version of my dissertation pushed me to think deeply about what I was really saying and to revise with an eye toward better representing my subject and grounding my interpretations in evidence. Dr. Legge's passion for our rich rhetorical heritage and her commitment, care, and openness as a teacher fed my nascent understanding of the discipline and stirred me to offer more of myself to my own students. More, when she introduced me to the work of Dwight Conquergood, she put me in touch with ideas that have shaped my understanding of the ethnographer's moral obligation and the processes and implications of doing ethnography. I'm especially grateful for my advisor, Dr. Jennifer Eastman Attebery, whose seminar on how to read an oral poem was the seedbed out of which my dissertation emerged, who was my champion throughout the examination and writing process, and whose generous feedback, patience, and encouragement were touchstones when I became discouraged. Seeing her apply her mind and heart as a scholar and mentor has been formative in my thinking about the work of the academy.

I'm also indebted to Alex Caldiero, who over the course of this project has become more than a research subject; I've come to consider him more so a colleague and friend. The conversations we've had over the years about family, work, religion, teaching, and poetry have enriched my life as much as my consistent engagement with sonosphy has. His repetition (each time we met) of the Sicilian proverb "When the apple is ripe, it falls" taught me to be patient

with myself and this project as my ideas ripened in the context of my relationships and experiences. Alex's trust in my desire to represent his life and work well has sustained my sense of obligation to him as an ethnographer and a friend. I hope this apple hasn't fallen too far from its tree.

I'd be remiss if I didn't acknowledge fellow writer and long-time conversation partner Patricia Karamesines. Since I encountered her work over a decade ago (as of this writing), Patricia's ideas about language have had a tremendous impact on the course of my thinking about the ethics of language use and about language as a mode of communion—things I explore in depth in my dissertation. I've been especially stirred by her insistence that our vitality as individuals, communities, and a species, as well as the quality of our relationship with the environment, depend on the vitality of our language. Patricia's influence is woven into the fabric of my ethnography.

As is my family's influence. Without grandparents and parents who stressed the value of learning and living with hope (as much by how they lived as by what they said), I wouldn't have had the confidence or the courage to pursue my doctorate. I've been sustained in particular by the example of my paternal grandpa, Dr. Don L. Chadwick, who died shortly after I began my doctoral program. The few times I lost hope that I'd ever finish this project, I pulled out a copy of his dissertation on plant science and leafed through the pages. Knowing that he made it through the process, I could return to my work with greater motivation and vigor. I've also been blessed by the support of my parents, John and Rosanne Chadwick, who fostered an environment in my childhood home where I always felt safe and nurtured. I'm convinced that this childhood environment gave me the grounding I've needed to take the risks inherent in being human and seeking to make a difference in the world.

Finally: I need to thank my wife, Jess, and our four daughters, Sidney, Alex, Hadley, and Jaylee. When I held each of our daughters for the first time, I felt called to make more of myself as a human being, to become the person they would need in a father. My abiding question in this pursuit has been: how can I best encourage my children to live fully and with hope in a restless world? This project has in part been an effort to explore that question; their voices play in the soundscape of my ideas just as they played in the soundscape of our home while I was working those ideas out in writing. Jess' voice has also been a constant through this process. She has been my greatest champion and friend since we first met. Her insistent love and support have shaped my life and thought into more than I could have shaped them on my own. Her commitment to me and to our daughters is among the few things I'm absolutely certain of. Without her, this dissertation wouldn't exist.

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Abstract

Utah-based poet, artist, and teacher Alex Caldiero calls his performative mode of language-making “sonosophy,” a neologism that can be taken to mean “sound wisdom,” “I am/they are wisdom,” and “I am/they are sounding the wisdom of sound.” Caldiero’s mode of *poiesis*, which often manifests as disruptive speech acts, calls upon various cultural figures and performance traditions to explore and practice language as a process of communion and relationship-making. I call this intermingling of figures and traditions Caldiero’s performance ecology; it consists of influences that he claims and that can be seen emerging from his lived experience and his personal ideas about sonosophy. These influences include his Sicilian cultural heritage; his mystical experience; his participation in Catholic and Latter-day Saint faith communities and religious rites; the embodied poetics of Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl”; the playfulness of Dada plastic, performance, and language arts; and a tradition of seers that contains (among others) the Paleolithic shaman, the premodern bard, and ancient Hebrew prophets. My dissertation seeks to flesh out this ecology by exploring the ways in which Caldiero can be seen enacting the history and character of each figure and tradition as he performs. I do this by using a methodology I call “dialogical coperformative ethnography,” a mode of representation and interpretation that begins with ethnopoetic transcriptions of Caldiero in performance and that then uses those descriptions to analyze, contextualize, and interpret patterns across representative work from Caldiero’s oeuvre. Applying this methodology to Caldiero’s work, I suggest that an understanding of his performance ecology can shed light on his performative persona and provide a lens through which to interpret what he seems to be doing with sonosophy and to evaluate its ethical and pedagogical implications beyond its function as a mode of poetry-making. Along the way I draw from my personal experiences to respond to, play with, push back against, and elaborate on the

influence sonosopher and sonosophy have been on my presence in the world, my relationships with others, and my thinking about the acts of language- and relationship-making.

ForeWord

The Problem and Promise of Sonosophy;

Or, Teasing out and Teasing at the Sonosopher's Definitional Ecology

Licodia Eubea, a small mountain town in southeastern Sicily, has been inhabited since the 6th century BCE. The modern town inhabits space once occupied by an unknown Sicel city whose enduring material and cultural presence manifest in artifacts, ruins, and burial sites (“Licodia”; Leighton 245). Such materialities imbue the place with a sense of its deep history, bridging past and present with an always unfolding performance of cultural memory: the expression of shared values, narratives, and experiences through shared objects, places, and narrative forms. In this way, the abiding presence of the town’s past connects its material and immaterial realities. As Licodia Eubea-born poet Alex Caldiero noted in a 2007 conversation with documentary filmmaker Helen Whitney, this sense of connection in his birthplace between the material and the immaterial further emerges in the constant impingement of “the idea of the magical world and the everyday world” (“Why”). I take this to mean that, at least in the town as Caldiero knows it, the inhabitants’ experience with and understanding of the mystical bleed into their everyday experience—and vice versa. As such, many inhabitants may grow up sensing no distinction between these modes of experience.

The church is one place where the mystical and the everyday impinge upon each other in Licodia Eubea. In fact, the town’s activities, inhabitants, and social rituals are heavily influenced by and intertwined with the presence of its *chiesa madre*, its mother church, a Catholic basilica dedicated to Santa Margherita (Saint Margaret of Antioch) (“*Chiesa*”): a 4th-century virgin who was put to death for rejecting the advances of corrupt Roman officials (“St. Margaret”). Caldiero

observed in a 2008 interview with former Utah Valley University (UVU) Behavioral Sciences professor Kathryn French that he spent his first eight years under the formative influence of this church and its ancient town. “I was born across the street from [Licodia Eubea’s] main church,” he said; and the main church in every Sicilian town, he continued, is known by “the same word as the womb”: *Matrici*. As a womb, the church, Caldiero said, “is the center of life as I grew up” (2). It was, he confessed in the same interview, an extension of his home. His participation in this expansive church family—which he served as an altar boy from age five to seventeen, helping the priest recite Mass in Latin—immersed him in its sense of community, its infrastructure, and its artifacts of worship: the candles, “[t]he incense, the music, the images of the saints and certain actions done from the Old Testament and the New Testament” (2–3). The presence of such objects in the church, his home, and the town, along with his participation in Mass, nurtured him into “a deep love of ritual,” a passion that informs his everyday interactions with and understanding of others and the world (2). That the church’s influence continues to shape Caldiero is evident in the way he constructed his statement about that influence: “the church is the center of life as I grew up.” By using the present-tense form of “to be” when speaking about something that happened in the past, he calls that action into the always unfolding “now” of his life narrative. So doing he suggests that while Licodia Eubea’s *chiesa madre* was a major presence in the environment of his childhood and was a determining factor in how he grew up, his everyday encounters with the sacred and his experience of religion as a home constructed and maintained by a community of like-minded people and as a repository of rituals and artifacts of worship continue to influence his life.

Caldiero’s deep love for ritual especially motivates and sustains his *poiesis*: his language-making and performance processes, which he calls *sonosophy*. In particular, the functions of

ritual inform his definition and application of the concept. This is apparent in the response he made to an email he received in 2010 from a film student named Hiep-Son Nguyen inquiring after the origin of the term “sonosopher.” Caldiero begins his return message with the claim that he doesn’t recall when he first started calling himself “sonosopher” but that he could share how he “began to use” the term and “from whence [he] derived it”: “I was studying the work of Raoul Hausmann,” he says, “who referred to himself as the ‘dadasopher.’ Mr. Housmann [sic] was one of the founding members of DADA,” an anti-movement movement in the plastic, performance, and language arts that arose in Zurich, Switzerland in the early twentieth century (“On the Origin”). From its inception, Dada was meant to unsettle ways of thinking that privilege Cartesian logic. That is, to call upon historian John D. Erickson, rather than assuming “an absolute, totalizing set of beliefs” around which to create and to criticize art and society so individuals and institutions could further reduce aesthetic and social operations “to a set of agreed upon tenets,” Dada stands at the periphery, decentered. From this position it resists the efforts of those who seek to assign it “value, defined function, or meaning” (Erickson Preface). And by refusing to be reduced to predefined categories, Dada, in all of its manifestations—including in the plastic, performance, and language arts—exists in the infinite play of value, meaning, and function. By calling himself the “dadasopher,” Hausmann insinuated that he found wisdom (*sophia*) in and dispensed wisdom from this space of play. In Caldiero’s email, he tells Nguyen that he adapted Hausmann’s label to his own concerns with sound and so “became the sonosopher”: one who practices sonosophy (“On the Origin”).

But what, exactly, is sonosophy? Although Caldiero says that, “generally speaking,” he considers it “a mix of sonal practices within the context of language [. . .] not as communication but as communion,” he also admits to having never been able to “satisfactorily define” the term

(“On the Origin”). He could, of course, just be pulling Nguyen’s leg. He could have a completely satisfactory definition in mind but withholds it to keep people wondering over his performance mode and to tease others’ meaning-making fantasies, which in general demand that every word be definable. While his confession could be motivated by any—or all—of these possibilities, it could also be sincere. He could be caught up in the slipperiness of language, in the reality that words slide among meanings as they emerge from a dynamic semantic field. Then again, these motivations aren’t mutually exclusive. Caldiero’s poetics could be self-consciously bound up in the slipperiness of language as a way of playing with his audience and disrupting common notions of how language functions.

In the ethnography that follows—my dialogical, coperformative attempt to represent, explore, and interpret Caldiero’s *poiesis*—that’s exactly what I assume: that by definition and in practice sonosophy is slippery and that the sonosopher applies this slipperiness to communal ends. To sufficiently examine my second assumption, I need to begin by unraveling my first—I need to explore sonosophy’s definitional problem, which is that the term may not have a single, satisfactory definition. This doesn’t mean, of course, that it has no definition; rather, that—true to its conception via Dada—it’s an elusive concept that plays among values, meanings, and functions. The word’s slipperiness is especially evident in its potential etymologies: one derivation has direct Latin roots with both noun and verb forms, while another is linguistically-mixed. To meet my needs, I’ll call the former derivation a, with subsets a.1 and a.2, and the latter derivation b.

Derivation a: Sonosophy’s Latin roots are *sonus* (sound) and *-sophy* (wisdom). When *sonus* is a noun (a.1), the term signifies the wisdom of sound, wisdom being the state of having seen (from Proto-Indo-European *weid*, to see, and Old English *-dom*, state or condition

[“Wise”]). In terms of this derivation, I take sonosophy to be the expansive sense of perception available to hearers as they tune in to the world’s diverse soundscape, which includes, among other things, sound structures made by humans (such as language, rituals, and music) and sounds that originate in the natural environment. When *sonus* is a verb (a.2), sonosophy becomes the act of sounding wisdom: of uttering ideas and making verbal gestures (sounds) that are intended to augment the experience, the senses, and the reasoning powers of those listening.

Derivation b: Beyond (or even alongside) the derivation of *sonos-* from *sonus* and in light of Caldiero’s Mediterranean background, *sono-* could also stem from the Italian verb *sono*, the first person singular and third person plural conjugations of *essere*, which translates as “to be.” *Sono*, then, means “I am” or “they are” (“Sono”). When combined with the suffix *-sophy*, this construction of sonosophy yields “I am/they are wisdom,” suggesting that the sonosopher’s field of study is his “I,” which always emerges in relation to some “they.” The use of the pronoun “I” “reflects [the] self-focus” of its user (Chung and Pennebaker 354). Philosopher and sociologist George Herbert Mead characterizes the “I” as a person’s active self, which is always in dialogue with her “me.” And an individual’s “me” in turn emerges from the accumulated attitudes that others (“they”) take toward her and that she consciously or unconsciously receives; the “me,” then, is the individual’s self-perception as informed by her interactions with others. The “I,” however, consists of the ways in which a person responds to the demands others make on her “me”; as such, the “I” is a mark of a person’s subjectivity and agency. Although a person’s self-perception is heavily influenced by the stance others take toward and the demands others place on her, in Mead’s social psychology—as in Caldiero’s sonosophy—the socially-constructed subject retains the ability to respond spontaneously during social interactions, to choose how and who she wants to be in the presence of others (see Mead). As a function of derivation b,

sonosophy asks after how this subject is constructed, exploring what it means for the “I” to be in relation with “they” and to be fully present in the world; how a person’s sense of being-in-the-world is constituted; and how that sense informs the ways a person approaches and interacts with others and with her environment.

The “to be” verb in “I am wisdom” suggests that the sonosopher’s exploration extends across his sense of being in the world as he *is*—as he experiences and expresses this sense of being—at any given moment, in any given place, when acting or being acted upon, and/or under various emotional, physical, social, and environmental conditions. This dynamic sense is expressed in the range of statements that can indicate a person’s present state of being and acting, as in: “I am happy. I am sad. I am healthy. I am ill. I am here. I am sitting. I am walking. I am talking. I am with you. I am happy when I am here; I am sad when I am there. I am happy when I am sitting or walking or talking or doing anything, anywhere with you.” Across the range of “I am” statements, the expression “I am” encapsulates the dynamic nature of selfhood: that across the circumstances, conditions, and experiences of a person’s life, her sense of being-in-the-world is both ever-present and malleable.

On one hand, this sense is ever-present in that a person’s perception of the world is always based on her knowledge, beliefs, and experiences; and the subjectivity of perception is a constant: no matter how hard we try, we’ll never be able to be anyone else. On the other hand, this sense is malleable in that a person’s self-concept is, as psychologist Robert Jay Lifton observes, “fluid and many-sided.” In his exploration of what he calls “the protean self”—a “mode of being” named after shape-shifting Proteus, Greek god of the sea—Lifton suggests that “the restlessness and flux” of the post-World War II world have imposed a sense of restlessness and flux on our lives. “But rather than collapse under these threats and pulls,” he says, “the self

turns out to be surprisingly resilient. It makes use of bits and pieces [gathered from] here and there” to maintain its being “and [it] somehow keeps going.” As a result, he continues, “[w]e find ourselves evolving a self of many possibilities, one that has risks and pitfalls but at the same time holds out considerable promise for the human future” (1–2). Lifton’s observations suggest that the promise of developing and maintaining a protean self-concept—of being able to recognize and acknowledge who, what, when, where, why, how, and/or with whom “I am” in the world—emerges from my movement among emotional, physical, social, and environmental conditions. This promise also informs and is informed by the many possibilities available in these conditions for me to learn, learn from, and adapt to different ways of acting and being in the world. Additionally, it suggests (as Mead also asserts) that the self is relational: that the characteristics and possibilities of a person’s “I” are entangled in the person’s relationships with others as well as with her surroundings and past, present, and future—or “possible”—selves (see Anderson and Chen; Markus and Nurius).

The expression “I am/they are wisdom” embodies this fluid, many-sided, relational self. In particular it points to the insights and expansive ways of seeing and being that can emerge from deep observation of and engagement with an ever-present, malleable, interpersonal “I” and the others the “I” finds herself in relation with. As someone who can claim this expression and its implications as a defining element of his *poiesis*, the sonosopher not only takes the “I” and its possibilities and relationships as his field of study but also as his mode of making language. As he performs, he actively moves among, compounds, and shares with his audience different aspects of his selfhood. In the process, he brings these aspects into conversation or plays individual aspects off of others to develop an expansive, playful system of thinking, expressing thought, and communing with others. I call this system Caldiero’s performance ecology to

highlight the interdependence among its parts; each node interacts with and influences the others. The nature of this performance ecology and its translation into practice is mirrored in the character of the term's definitional ecology: in the interplay among potential meanings of sonosophy as a concept. (I explore other definitions of sonosophy throughout my essay.)

Taken together, the term's derivations suggest that the concept signifies in multiple ways at once. For example, reading derivation a.1 against derivation b yields "I am/they are sound wisdom," while reading derivation a.2 against derivation b yields "I am/they are sounding wisdom"; reading all three derivations against each other yields "I am/they are sounding the wisdom of sound." Although each of these compound definitions means something different, they all resonate from the sonosopher's presence and actions in the world, which further resonate with his audiences and his diverse field of influences. This suggests that sonosophy's functions and value emanate from the ways the sonosopher makes sounds (e.g., with his body itself and its interactions with other bodies and with his surroundings) and the sounds the sonosopher makes (e.g., his language, music, and other verbal gestures). Through this ecology of sonal practices, he reaches both inward and outward, using sound to awaken and engage his whole self as well as the selves of those within range of his speech acts.

My ethnography wanders this range, circling sonosophy's semantic field as I listen to, represent, and interpret Caldiero's *poiesis* via personal and scholarly reflections that reach to meet him on his own moral grounds and, in conjunction with him, to foster in others deeper awareness of and a sense of obligation for the spaces and relationships we make and unmake with our words. I intend two main things with this project. First, because Caldiero has not yet been deeply studied, I hope my efforts to transcribe, contextualize, interpret, and speak back to his work will open the way to further understanding and discussion of his performative *poiesis*.

This hope converses with performance theorist Richard Schechner's challenge that humanists and scholars of aesthetics, performance, and culture ought to view performance as a key paradigm for analyzing and interpreting cultural, historical, and social processes ("Performance" 9). And my response to Schechner's challenge gives rise to my second intention for this project: because sonosophy assumes an interdependent relationship among the processes of poetry-making, poetry performance, and performance ethnography, it becomes a fertile site from which to play with and interrogate these processes, their interrelations, and how they function in human terms. Through my ethnographic consideration of sonosophy, then, I begin to converse with scholars who view performing as a moral act, as ethnographer Dwight Conquergood puts it ("Performing" 1). This ethical focus posits sonosophy as a mode of ethnography through which observers are called to openly, actively, and ethically engage other minds and bodies in the reiterative processes of making, unmaking, and re-making the world. Through its whole-bodied performance of words, sounds, gestures, and images, sonosophy has the potential to communicate profoundly and to influence observers in ways not possible through less dynamic discursive structures. And such communication becomes an invitation for observers to enter into the deep fellowship and peace that can emerge from shared experiences with the making, performance, reception, and representation of oral poetics.

A Word about My "Words"

Because sonosophy attends to sound structures and is constituted in and by acts of utterance, I attempt to address and to represent its multivocal, oral nature by dividing my ethnography not into chapters but into "Words": ForeWord, FirstWord, SecondWord, and so on. I take my cue from oral tradition scholar John Miles Foley, who used the same convention in his book, *How to*

Read an Oral Poem, which introduced me to the process of interpreting oral poetries. The terminology emerged from Foley's studies of South Slavic epic singers, who build their oral compositions using utterance units called *reč*, the South Slavic word for "words." As Foley notes, these "identify at minimum a line or metrical part-line," but they could also refer "to whole scenes or even entire song-performances" ("Homer"). For these singers, then, a word isn't "a string of black letters bounded by white spaces or something enshrined in a dictionary." Rather, it's "a unified utterance," a speech act "never as small and partial as what we mean by a word but large and complete enough to have idiomatic force" (Foley, *How to Read* 17). In this sense, an orally-composed word is a mode of referencing ideas and meanings that are bound up in the singers' discourse communities. By organizing his discussion using these "nontextual units" or "thought-bytes" and not the text-biased "book-idiom" of chapters, he intends to remind readers 1) that oral poetries function differently than written texts and 2) that if we fail "to examine our assumptions" about oral and written texts and to approach each on their own terms, we run the risk of devaluing and silencing traditions that contribute vitality to our cultural and verbal ecologies (20). I share Foley's intent and hope that my Words resonate with and remain accountable to Caldiero's attempts to attend deeply to the world as well as to his experience thereof.

To this same end, I've included several sections—"Conference of the Birds," I call them—in my ThirdWord, FourthWord, and AfterWord that describe various moments of encounter I've had with animals, people, and ideas that have influenced my thinking about language use as well as my language- and relationship-making practices relative to the various topics I take up in each Word. I draw inspiration here from Caldiero, who called the third part of his 2013 poetic memoir *sonosuono* "Conference of the Birds" (127). "Conferences so called 'of

the birds,” he says, “are a Mediterranean tradition going back to Homeric times.” Such gatherings are held off and on in Sicily “to address contemporary situations and needs” by exploring “the latest findings of the sciences and the arts regarding identity and culture in the widest and wildest sense” (129). He includes six entries in *sonosuno* that explore this mode of communion and that describe his experience participating in and being influenced by a Conference of the Birds. My own entries (as my ethnography itself) derive from a similar desire to use my experiences and relationships as a lens for seeing myself and my subject differently and for inquiring after a deeper understanding of Caldiero’s *poiesis* and the processes by which humans make poetry, language, and relationships.