

READING ALOUD MATTERS

This folio and commentary give me the opportunity to consider one component of my sound/language-based art practice, that of reading aloud. Reading aloud has become an increasingly central part of how I consider our relationship with other animals through voice and language. Sound is three dimensional and fills space, and vocality adds a sonic dimension to a text that transforms reading into a shared spatial multilingual experience.

Text and Images by Catherine Clover

Reading aloud is a component of my art practice, an art practice that uses listening as its raw material. Reading aloud is one response to this listening process. It could be suggested that when I read aloud, I am not listening, but this is not the case. Only through attentive listening to particular sites are texts selected for reading aloud. Voice cannot function fully without listening.

Reading aloud is a physical act that is spoken and heard; it is social and inclusive. The texts I am addressing here are not my own writing but are written by others. These readings take place out in the real world where multiple species congregate. In keeping with Donna Haraway's term *naturecultures*, where a constantly changing reality is manifested and where previous oppositions merge and blend, the listeners to the readings are multispecies.

Most of the readings take place externally, outdoors in the physical worlds of people and animals and birds and insects, in the mixed and maladaptive settings of cities: along streets and in squares, under bridges, in parks and gardens, beside railway lines. The sounds of each site blend with my voicing of the words; voices mix with my own; sometimes my voice is drowned out and inaudible. Listeners are locals and visitors, wild and domestic, frequent or infrequent users of the site, who may be listening attentively, casually or just in passing. Voice carries the words on the page but separates from

them, and communicates independently of them while restoring the vocal act to writing.

As children we are attentive listeners to stories: an adult reads to us at bedtime and we listen, enthralled, as we drift off to sleep through imaginative worlds. From a young age, well before we can read for ourselves, we are a ready audience for listening to the storytelling voice, to the voice that reads aloud, the voice that precedes silent reading. We learn to read by reading aloud yet soon after this achievement we are expected to stop what we are told is a bad habit (Perec, *Species of Spaces*, 177), and learn to read silently. Perec suggests that this is '... no doubt because it smacks overmuch of application and of effort. Which doesn't stop the ... muscles of the vocal cords and the glottis being activated when we read. Reading remains inseparable from this labial mimeticism and its vocal activity – there are texts that should only be murmured or whispered, others that we ought to be able to shout or beat time to.' (Perec, *Species of Spaces*, 177)

Reading aloud is not storytelling in the oral tradition where characters and plot may change and morph with each re-telling. Reading aloud is based in the literary tradition of the written word, where re-tellings are expected to repeat and repeat the same story over and over again. The reader mostly reads the same words each time. I say 'mostly' because while the words on the page remain static, the readerly voice is in flux and moves through the text differently each



Catherine Clover

Reading Place Aloud rehearsal documentation 2017 CC3.0 Catherine Clover



Catherine Clover and Stephen Barrass

Untaming the Urban collaboration/performance 2016
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time. The reader's contribution is enactment, not accuracy with language. I sometimes make mistakes: I skip a word, I say a word twice, I misread and I mispronounce. 'Voice is fundamentally and expressively paradoxical' (Neumark, *Voicetracks*, 8).

Reading aloud means I hear my own voice, but these texts are not my own language. My voice coordinates with the words on the page, words that are assembled and constructed in a particular way. The words form in my mouth as I find my way around them and push them out into the world through the breath. The shape of the words and my pronunciation affects the telling. I learned to pronounce the characteristics of my language, this language, when I was young; this language and its sounds shape how my tongue teeth lips jaw and breath enmesh and coordinate to deliver the words vocally. My lungs project the sound out into the world.

As these readings do not use my words, this is not my vernacular or my idiom. So, when I read aloud in this way, my voice is separated from language – that is, the language and words I would



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Reading The Birds site-specific performance 2014 CC3.0 Catherine Clover



Catherine Clover and Johanna Hällsten
Calls from Bethnal Green site-specific collaboration 2013 CC3.0 Catherine Clover and Johanna Hällsten

The Birds

ON December the third the wind changed overnight and it was winter. Until then the autumn had been mellow, soft. The leaves had lingered on the trees, golden red, and the hedgerows were still green. The earth was rich where the plough had turned.

Nat Hocken, because of a war-time disability, had a part-time job and did not work full-time at the farm. He worked three days a week, and they gave him the lighter jobs: hedging, the repairs to the farm buildings.

Although he was married, with children, his was a bachelor's disposition; he liked best to work alone. It pleased him to be given a bank to build up, or a gate to mend at the end of the peninsula, where the sea surrounded the farm on either side. Then, at midday, he would pause and eat, and that his wife had baked for him, and sitting on the bench would watch the birds. Autumn was best for this, for in spring the birds flew inland, purposeful, and they knew where they were bound, the rhythm and the life brooked no delay. In autumn those that had come from overseas but remained to pass the winter were called by the same driving urge, but because migration was over they followed a pattern of their own. Great flocks of them came to the peninsula, restless, uneasy, spending themselves in wheeling, circling in the sky, now settling to roost on the turned soil, but even when they fed it was without desire. Restless

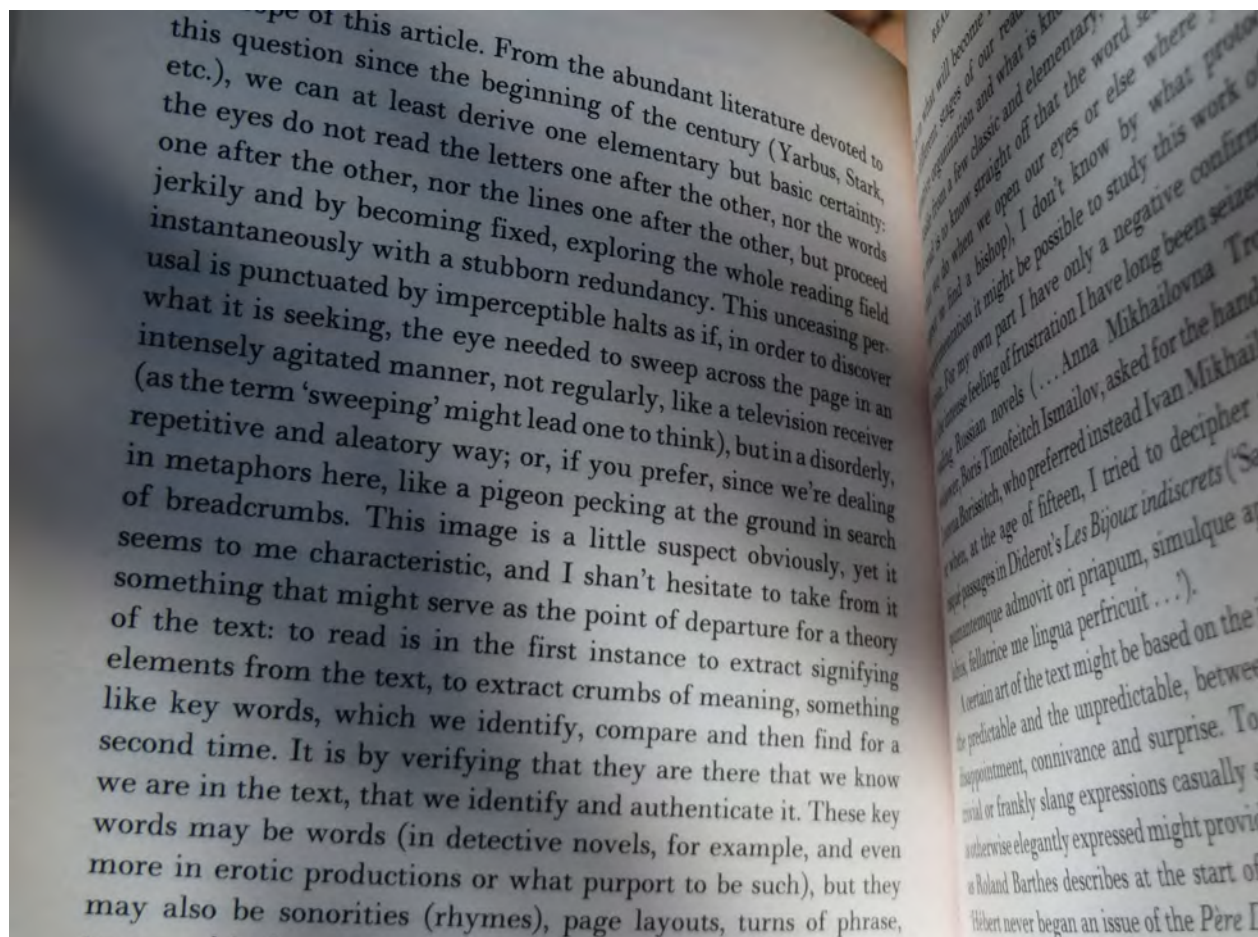
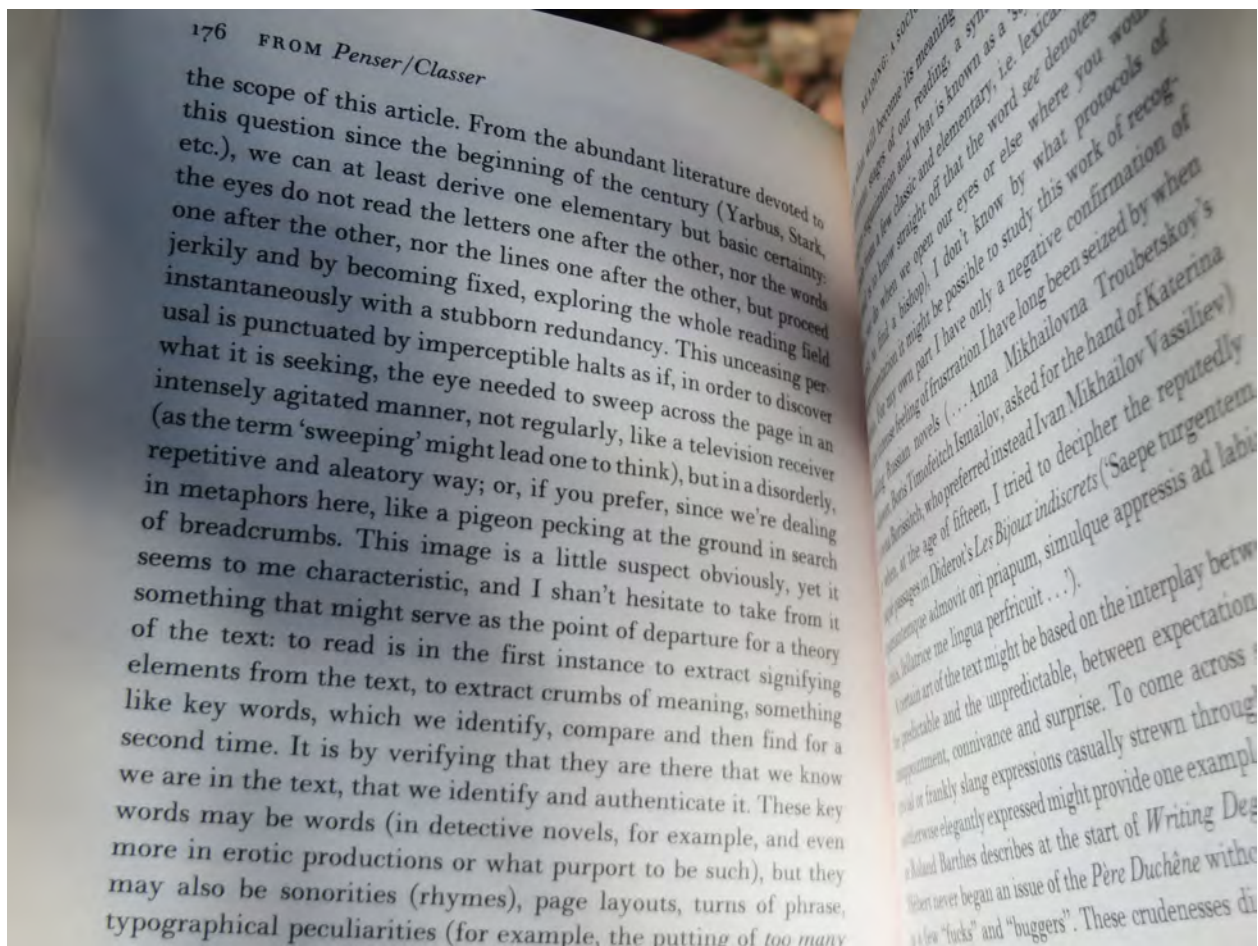
THE BIRDS

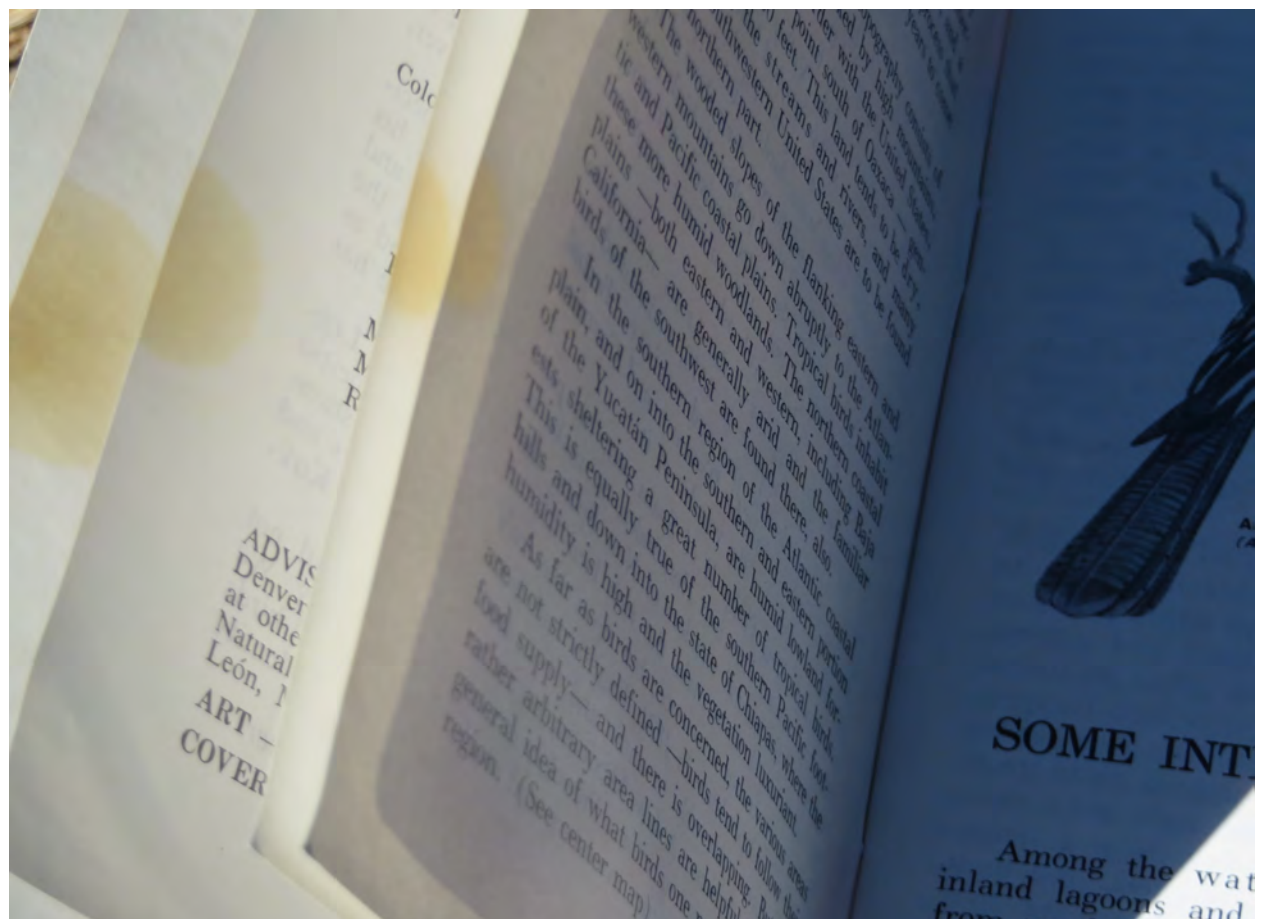
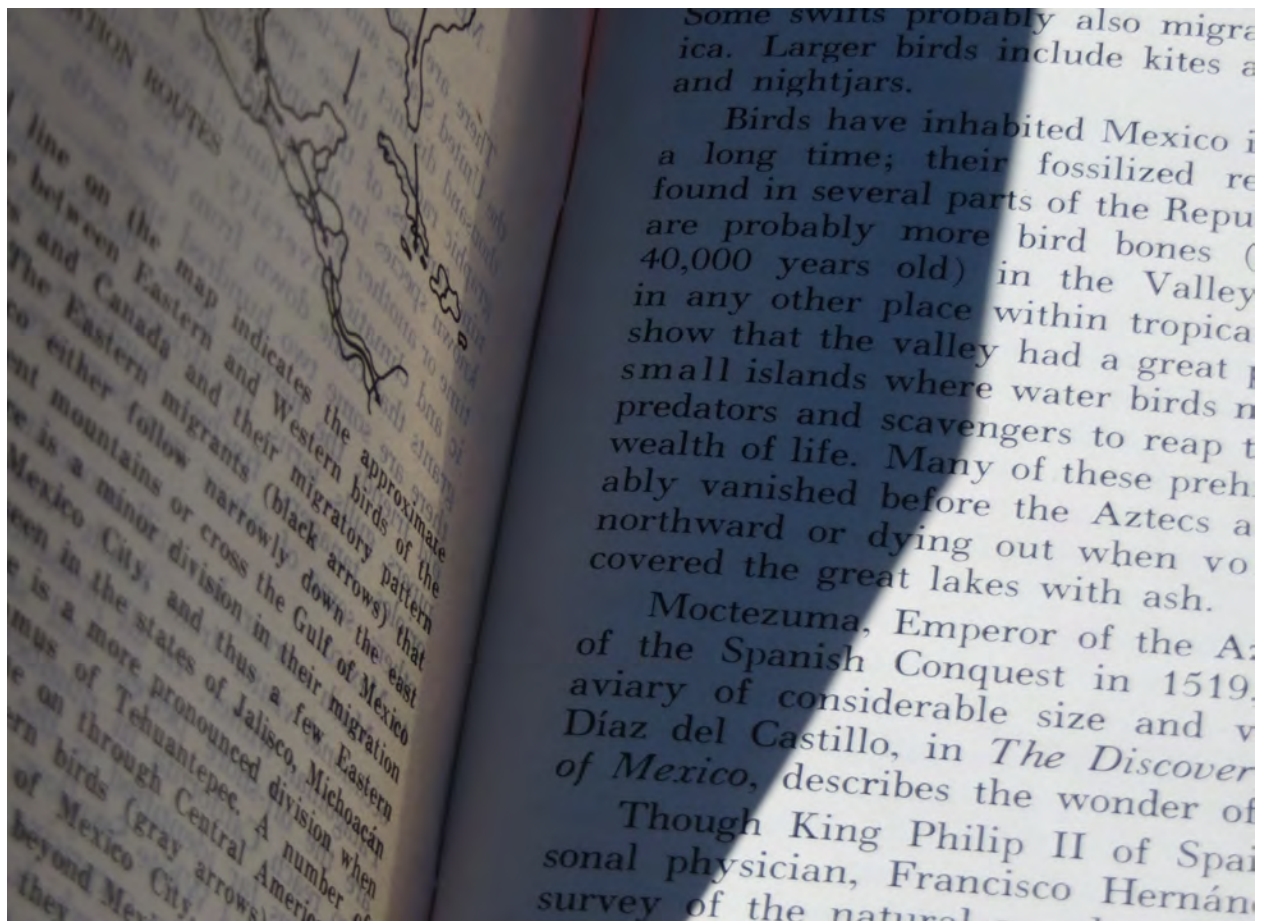
Nat heard the wind in the chimney. Not the storm and blustery south-westerly gale, bringing the rain, but east wind, cold and dry. It sounded hollow in the chimney, and a loose slate rattled on the roof. Nat listened, and he could hear the sea roaring in the bay. Even the air in the small bedroom had turned chill: a draught came under the skirting of the door, blowing upon the bed. Nat drew the blanket round him, leant closer to the bed, to his sleeping wife, and stayed wakeful, watchful, aware of the cold without cause.

Then he heard the tapping on the window. The ivy creeper on the cottage walls to break loose and scratch the pane. He listened, and the tapping continued until, in the silence, sound, Nat got out of bed and went to the window. He looked and as he did so something brushed his hand, his knuckles, grazing the skin. Then he saw the flutter and it was gone, over the roof, behind the cottage.

It was a bird, what kind of bird he could not tell. It must have driven it to shelter on the sill.

He shut the window and went back to bed. His knuckles wet put his mouth to the scratch. There was blood. Frightened, he supposed, and bewitched





Catherine Clover

Reading 'A Bird Watcher's Guide to Mexico' by Margaret L. Wheeler rehearsal documentation 2018 CC.0 Catherine Clover

choose—and I embrace another's language, another's way of articulating. This is not a foreign language, not a second or third language, but another means of articulating the same language that I use every day and that I know intimately. Reading aloud is voicing a text, adding voice to a text or, as Adriana Cavarero notes above, reinstating voice in reading. My voice enacts the author's language. Reading aloud I animate and activate the text physically: I choose when to breathe, to pause, to emphasise a word or phrase or to diminish another. I choose the pace, the rhythm and metre, the prosody; the pitch (more treble here, less bass there), the amplitude and its choreography (loudly, quietly), the timbre of each word. I choose duration—how long the sounds will last and when they will fade. 'Voice works intersubjectively, relationally, affectively, and emotionally – transmitting and moving through us and between us and others. Voice, which is more than/different from the speech and the meanings it may carry, encompasses and transmits both preverbal and nonverbal vocalisations of intensities (affects) as well as expression of feelings and emotions.' (Neumark, *Voicetracks*, 7)

Through the act of reading aloud my voice leaves a trace on the words that does not occur when I read silently. While I grew up in the suburbs of London, my parents came from the country, the Scottish Highlands and lochs, and the flat expanses of Suffolk. I am now a British migrant living in Australia. When I read aloud, I am aware of this vocal heritage. My voice embraces a text that already exists and slightly—minimally—recalibrates it, just to the left of centre, over to one side, just a little bit different from reading silently. I make the text my own through 'my body's capacity to make sound: my keen awareness of the muscles in my mouth and the stress-rhythms of the language I grew up in' (Briggs, *This Little Art*, 171). I read the language of the author, I use my voice to coax that language out into the physical world. Reading another's words is a duet perhaps, and certainly performative; perhaps it is a ventriloquism or even (could I claim the conceit of) a translation, in which, as translator Kate Briggs notes, the authorial position is complicated (Briggs, *This Little Art* 34). I am voicing for another who is physically absent from the site of the reading.

My voice shapes sound to fit the words on the page. The listeners hear my voice but may not speak the language of the words. As a multispecies audience it is unlikely that all who

are present speak the language that I read. But voice is its own communication and has its own reach. '... the act of speaking is relational: what it communicates first and foremost, beyond the specific content that the words communicate, is the acoustic, empirical, material relationality of singular voices' (Cavarero, *For More than one Voice*, 10). Separating voice from language explodes the boundaries of language so that we are all, potentially, multi-linguists, breaking with the regulation of the master code (Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory*, 3).

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Catherine Clover's multidisciplinary practice addresses communication through voice and language and the interplay between hearing/listening and seeing/reading. Using field recording, digital imaging and the spoken/written word she is exploring an expanded approach to language within species and across species through a framework of everyday experience. She teaches at Swinburne University (MA Writing) Melbourne, and holds a practice led PhD (Fine Art) through RMIT University.