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► **To cite this version:**

| Naomi Toth. Echo's echoes, or what to do with Vanessa Place. Jacket2, 2018. hal-03119711

**HAL Id: hal-03119711**

**<https://hal.parisnanterre.fr/hal-03119711>**

Submitted on 25 Jan 2021

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# Echo's echoes, or what to do with Vanessa Place

NAOMI TOTH



Above: a portion of Alexandre Cabanel's 'Echo,' 1874, oil on canvas, 38 1/2 x 26 1/4" (97.8 x 66.7 cm), [The Metropolitan Museum of Art](#), New York.

I wrote about poetics of radical evil,<sup>[1]</sup> and there must be an art of the same kind. Art that is willing to be affirmatively evil, not immoral exactly, but as a work of malfeasance, not for the polemic or didactic turn, showing that certain things are bad, stupid, etc, that's easy enough, and sadly it seems one is expected to say these things, which is another form of obscenity, but for a more primal acceptance. This too is our artefact, this too, too human. Echo homo, so to speak.<sup>[2]</sup> — *Vanessa Place*

Echo repeats. Her practice, in eviscerating *ecce*, exposes the human.<sup>[3]</sup> For her repetitions point to the obscene, that which we push off-scene, the refuse we refuse in order to make being — our human being — be. "Ergo, echo," Vanessa Place has said of herself.<sup>[4]</sup> But if, on the one hand, Echo adds to our artifacts, augmenting our understanding — *Echo ergo sum* — she does so through what she removes, withdraws, or lacks — *Echo ergo subtract*, so to speak. Through this double movement, Echo's repetitions become the paradoxical indicator of excess.

When read alongside the nymph's myth and the history of its influence on the poetic tradition, Vanessa Place's repetition-based poetry may be understood as the gesture of a contemporary Echo. Such a reading of her work allows us to better grasp why her song both entices and frustrates the critic who seeks to go after her, as she implicates her listeners in her enterprise of exposure, whether we like it or not.

Repetition simultaneously produces and undermines identities, as it both promises and structurally disappoints the hope that one might coincide with oneself, which is the condition of reflexivity and subjective mastery. It therefore comes as no surprise that the nymph's own identity should prove problematic. Indeed, this has been the case since classical times. John Hollander, in his seminal study *The Figure of Echo*, identifies two major traditions in the Echo myth<sup>[5]</sup>: the first can be more or less placed under the sign of augmentative repetition; the second, subtractive.

In the first tradition, Echo is associated with the reverberations of pure sound or music. Her first appearance may be traced back to the Homeric hymns, where she is the not-always-incarnate voice of the Muses and of nature, accompanying Pan. She takes on more definite form in one of the most well-known versions of this Echo, Longus's second-century *Daphnis and Chloé*. Here, Echo is embodied; she is a mortal of exceptional beauty who repeats all the sounds of nature. Daphnis tells

Chloé Echo's story:

she danced with the Nymphs and sang with the Muses, but, jealous of her virginity, she avoided all males, both Gods and Men. Pan was incensed against the maiden, being jealous of her singing, and vexed that he could not enjoy her beauty. He inspired with frenzy the shepherds and goatherds, who, like dogs or wolves, tore the maiden to pieces, and flung her limbs [*adonta ta melê*, a pun on limbs and songs] here and there, still quivering with song.[6]

And yet, though her body and song are thus dispersed and fragmented, her voice continues, for Echo's disjointed body parts, which the Earth covers over, nonetheless still preserve their gift of song, continuing to imitate all sounds just as the maiden did when alive — the voices of men and gods, musical instruments, and the cries of wild beasts.[7]

These torn limbs continue to repeat Pan's tune itself, such that he still goes after her, even after having done away with her body, searching for the hidden origin of the voice that repeats his own music. And once Daphnis has finished telling Echo's story, Echo repeats the tale, which, Longus affirms, proves he has said nothing that was not exact.[8] Echo, then, acts as a guarantee of authenticity, and, first and foremost, of her own: her delayed voice certifies the truth of her own existence, boring a potentially infinite *mise-en-abyme* into Longus's narrative.

This tradition of Echo as the song of the world has had many descendants, notably in pastoral and lyrical poetry where the poet's ultimate aim is, as Wordsworth puts it, to "[murmur] near the running brooks / a music sweeter than their own." [9] Echo could also be understood as the vocal version of the reflections provided by Romantic poetry's "infinite mirrors" in Friedrich Schlegel's famous affirmation of poetry's philosophical potential in fragment 116 of the *Athenaeum*:

[Romantic poetry] alone can become, like the epic, a mirror of the whole circumambient world, an image of the age. And it can also — more than any other form — hover at the midpoint between the portrayed and the portrayer, free of all real and ideal self-interest, on the wings of poetic reflection, and can raise that reflection again and again to a higher power, can multiply it in an endless succession of mirrors.[10]

This association with philosophy is not fortuitous, for the figure of Echo as the voice of knowledge of the world is also found in natural philosophy. So Francis Bacon writes in 1605:

But it is well devised that of all words and voices Echo alone should be chosen for the world's wife, for that is the true philosophy which echoes most faithfully the voices of the world itself, and is written as it were at the world's own dictation, being nothing else than the image and reflection therefore, to which it adds nothing of its own, but only iterates and gives it back.[11]

Note that for Bacon, here, Echo's still-virginal voice conserves and restitutes the world: she gives speech to the inarticulate. Yet, if she is the embodiment of "true philosophy," it is because she "adds nothing of [her] own": nothing, that is, but that little slip of a thing which is philosophy itself. This enigmatic supplement can only be attained in an ever-deferred capture, in the consummation of a marriage that is always to come. In other words, the promise of recapturing the world unmodified lies in the folds of Echo's delayed and disseminated *phonè*. Echo's voice might therefore constitute what Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman have called the "infra-thin" of poetic difference,[12] in which appropriated texts are transformed into poetry through the intervention of the poetic gesture. This gesture adds nothing and everything at once: everything *because* nothing. And if Echo allows for the creation of the philosophical concept, then we're close, here, to a definition of the ideal as a product of iteration, a definition so much of twentieth-century philosophy has drawn upon, in which voice creates the very phenomenon it substitutes itself for.[13] Echo, then, as the *potential* for the

concept.

However, her singing doesn't satisfy the philosophers entirely, for Echo's voice in this augmentative tradition is described primarily as murmur, melody, music, noise: vocalization and not quite *sign*. Another step is needed to get at the concept.<sup>[14]</sup> And so philosophers would bemoan the fact that they could not quite transcribe her dictation, that they could not catch her anew. Marin Mersenne, in the mathematical discussion of the echo phenomenon with which he opens his *Harmonie Universelle* (1636), regrets that he leaves many problems for "another Pan, that is, a more universal man in every way than I with further understanding so as to capture that fugitive."<sup>[15]</sup> Just as Longus describes Echo's body being dismembered by the frustrated Pan, unable to "enjoy" her, here the philosopher dreams of catching her and taking his revenge, of exercising analytical violence — *to analyze* is, of course, to break down, to decompose — on her song. Echo, here, is the ever-escaping singer who simultaneously promises and frustrates the concept, and in so doing, triggers the concept's violence.

The second major tradition of the Echo myth is the one we have inherited from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Here, the nymph is associated explicitly with articulate language, and not so much with augmentation as with subtraction. She is one of the very few figures in Ovid's text to have no genealogy, no origin of her own; not only that, but her metamorphosis is unique in that it leaves no concrete trace in the form of a plant or an animal: she is transformed into an invisible, ephemeral phenomenon.<sup>[16]</sup> Yet she enters the text endowed with a body and a voice, and a powerful one: by conversing with Juno, she diverts attention from Zeus's philandering, buying the time necessary for her fellow nymphs to escape the god's embrace and, therefore, the goddess's wrath. Her speech both stands in for and covers up Zeus's loves, thus acting both as substitute and decoy,<sup>[17]</sup> and for this she will be severely punished: Juno ensures that, henceforth: "when speaking ends, all she can do is double each last word / And echo back the voice she's heard."<sup>[18]</sup> Common to both mythological traditions, then, is that Echo's voice is engaged in *place-taking*, a practice which enrages to the point that it must be broken by the gods. Where Pan dismembers and scatters, however, Juno reduces and constrains.

Ovid then relates Echo's well-known debacle with Narcissus. She falls hopelessly in love with the handsome youth, and follows him around. Their conversation runs as follows:

<b>Narcissus</b>	<b>Echo</b>
Anyone here?	Here!
Come this way!	This way!
Why run away?	Run away?
Here, let us meet together!	Together!

Echo appears and tries to throw her arms around him but Narcissus rebuffs her:

<b>Narcissus</b>	<b>Echo</b>
Keep your arms from me! Be off!	
I'll die before I yield to you.	I yield to you. <sup>[19]</sup>

This exchange makes it clear that coincidence with one's own repeated speech is both desired and thwarted. It is just as clear that Echo's repetitions cannot to be understood in terms of simple imitation: here, lack is transformative and replication becomes active response. John Hollander notes that this version of the Echo myth, which emphasizes the restraining of her expressive powers and the limitation of her voice, is linked not so much with lyricism as with satire,<sup>[20]</sup> a genre which exploits its partiality to reflect back to a given society its own unacknowledged truths, its own off-scene: that is, that which is *obscene*. The meaning society thinks it is communicating and the meaning Echo sends back are uncomfortably different; her partial repetition of public verbal display conveys certain secrets such discourse is intended to cover up. In subtracting, then, Echo in fact adds

a great deal.

Which perhaps explains why Narcissus's reaction to his nonidentical vocal replica is violent rejection. For here, as in the augmentative tradition, Echo is the object of antagonism, which again leads to the erasure of her problematic and still virginal body, leaving only a voice:

Shamed and rejected in the woods she hides,  
and has her dwelling in the lonely caves.  
Yet her love endures and grows on grief  
And weeping vigils waste her frame away;  
Her body shrivels, all its moisture dries;  
Only her voice and bones are left; at last  
only her voice, her bones are turned to stone.  
So in the woods she hides and hills around  
For all to hear, alive, but just a sound.[21]

In both myths, Echo's voice survives her physical demise. It resonates in the liminal space between life and death, between ceasing and beginning again.

Significant parts of Vanessa Place's poetic practice may be read as a perpetuation of these two threads of the Echo tradition, notably her work beginning with the *Tragodia* trilogy (comprising *Statement of Facts*, *Statement of the Case*, and *Argument*, 2010–2011) extending through to *Boycott* (2013), the *Last Words* (2015 and ongoing), and *Gone with the Wind* (ongoing) projects, to cite but the most well known. Like those before her, Vanessa Place's Echo discontents: her dissymmetrical repetitions slice into our contemporary *ergo* and serve it up back to us, guts and all. Along which lines does the knife cut? What makes the dish indigestible?

The first problem she poses is that of *origin*. Echo could well serve as a figure of what Marjorie Perloff has called the "unoriginal genius" characteristic of the conceptual poetry of the late twentieth and new century, drawing on a heritage Perloff dates back to Benjamin's *Arcades Project*.<sup>[22]</sup> Echo's poetry certainly does proceed by the means of others, and apparently exclusively so. The most obvious consequence of this is that the practice of interpreting discourse is dissociated from that of identifying its point of origin. The author might be dead or alive, but there is no warrant out on him. It's not about authenticity or its attendant forms of authority, it's all about the language itself and the multiplicity of its effects on the receiver: what's interesting is not the intention that might consciously or unconsciously propel words forth, but what Echo, and then we, hear. Echo thereby appears as a modernist and a structuralist supreme, and in good company; as Patrick Greaney points out, the critique of authorship is so well worn these days that it no longer tells us much.<sup>[23]</sup> So far, so (relatively) unproblematic.

It would, however, as Greaney and others have shown, be disingenuous to stop here. For it is, at least in part, about the purveyor of the language in question. Echo's incarnation is just as problematic today as it has always been. Narcissus doesn't *immediately* reject his own words when they are played back to him: on the contrary, he actively seeks out the speaker. The rebuff occurs only when Echo appears before Narcissus, that is, when he sees his words coming from another body, one that clearly is not his own reflection. It is at this moment that he understands that their new embodiment ruins any hopes he might have entertained for fusion with himself — that is, for the euphoric union of identity — hopes that the repeated sound of his own words had held out for him. As reception of Vanessa Place's work has shown, a body is laid on the line, be it invisible or visible: she, *alive*, repeats the words of the dead (*Last Words*, or in her own autopsy report in *Les Singes: A Passion Play for Today*); she, a woman, in a society in which the vast majority of sexual crimes are committed by men, tells rape jokes (the performance *If I wanted your opinion, I'd remove the duct tape*); she, a white woman, retweets a racist text written by another white woman (*Gone with the Wind*) with the moniker of Hattie McDaniel, the black woman who played Mammy in the book's film adaptation,

exposing the layers of linguistic identity appropriation that the original and still-cherished American classic hides.

This corporal exhibition of a nonauthorial body is one of the ways Echo stages the duplicity of her discourse's origin, that is, its double nature. By overtly underscoring her double dealing, she distinguishes herself from the figures of the Imposter on the one hand and the Unknowing Fraud on the other, for she neither dissimulates the fact that her discourse is not her own, like the former, nor does she repeat unawares, like the latter.<sup>[24]</sup> This display of difference also distances the performance gesture inherent in these projects from acting in the traditional sense: Vanessa Place's works are not theatre in that the speaker does not play another's role. When she reads aloud the last words of death row convicts (*Last Words*), Vanessa Place makes no attempt to reproduce intonation nor to simulate the affects of another: formally, everything about her performance emphasizes what separates her utterance from that of the initial enunciator.<sup>[25]</sup>

This use of her body and voice to materialize distance from the language they channel provides us with an angle from which to approach the controversy concerning Vanessa Place's *Gone with the Wind* project, in particular her retweeting of Margaret Mitchell's entire book. By choosing the moniker of Hattie McDaniel's Mammy, Vanessa Place structurally displays the gap between her own body and the discourse repeated, which contrasts with and exposes Mitchell's insidious exploitation of layers of masks, making this masking plain for all to see. Vanessa Place's gesture was seen as blackfacing by the Mongrel Coalition Against Gringpo, yet it reenacts appropriations of racialized identities to opposite ends, explicitly exposing and implicitly denouncing the mechanisms of such a practice. Kim Calder writes in response to the criticism the work received that Vanessa Place "presents her body not only as a white body, but also as a knowingly guilty white body," making the racist place-taking of Mitchell's text "spectacularly ugly."<sup>[26]</sup> By exposing her own body in the form of the guilty subject, she also raises a broader question about the role a white subject can play in contemporary debates on race in the USA, a country where racism is no less deeply entrenched today than when it was less widely acknowledged, in which it operates as a structure that continues to place white Americans in a position of mastery, that is, in the position of the universal subject capable of pronouncing judgement.

Her choice of Twitter as the medium for this work does however seem to orient the work's reception. This medium displaces the text from its traditional abode on the page, removing it from a clearly identifiable literary sphere. This places the repeater and the receiver in a position of exteriority in relation to institutional cultural authority and official discourse, reversing Mitchell's gesture of distorting absorption of the speech of subjugated, excluded others into the hegemonic cultural sphere. Subjecting this novel to Twitter's then-140-character format allows Place to slice it up into such short morsels that the sentences are unable to realize their potential to signify fully in one neat piece. There is violence in this dicing up of the novel, just as there is violence in Place's gesture of textual erasure carried out in another part of her *Gone with the Wind* project, the performance piece in which, standing silently at a lectern, she turns blank pages of a book over one by one, taking the time it would have taken to read the pages aloud, and, after long minutes without any speech at all, pronouncing only the heroine's closing line: "Tomorrow is another day" before closing the book and leaving the stage. This truncated reprisal of Mitchell's text thereby has these closing words serve other, opposing ends, implying that "tomorrow" — the future — will not necessarily hold something new, but will in all likelihood be another "today." The piece thereby suggests that the structures the source text relies upon are still insidiously active in the present, and that much less has disappeared with the wind than one might have thought. <sup>[27]</sup>

This brings up the second problem Vanessa Place's Echo poses: one of destination, or the ends of poetic language. Master discourse is corrupted in her mouth not so much because her speech is second (and could, by extension, be considered as secondary or lesser), but because it deviates. It withdraws language from the usual economies in which it functions so well that we almost don't notice it. In Echo's mouth, language thickens into rhetoric, fiction, sound, and rhythm until it clogs

the linguistic economy, stopping its circulation as an exchange of values, rendering it, on one level, inert. If language's mission is communication, her repetitions make it dysfunction. If it is to establish fact, as in the criminal defense texts she appropriates, she has it serve up statements of fictions. If it is to create consensus as to the nature of past events, one that might be used to legislate and make legitimate judgements, she decontextualizes this language such that it relates disjunctive dramatic episodes that point towards, but fail to form, an overarching narrative: *Tragodia*.<sup>[28]</sup>

Of course, showing the fictionality of facts is another way of demonstrating the effective power of language, of narrative itself: the *Tragodia* series might displace these legal briefs from the courtroom, but that doesn't change the fact that someone has complained of violent suffering, and that someone will still be going to prison. The confessions extracted through police interrogations that form the second section of the *Last Words* performance (Silencio, Paris, November 6, 2015)<sup>[29]</sup> occur in a context in which, the listener realizes, speaking becomes the pronunciation of one's own death sentence. The redaction of feminist texts in uniquely masculine terms in *Boycott* draws attention to the pervasive and concrete effects of the linguistic construction of sexual difference by means of its very removal. Echo's withdrawal of language from one kind of economy directs attention back to that very economy, revealing what it adds to our everyday life, all the time. That is, Echo effectively bares both language's limits and the mechanisms of its functionality.

For Vanessa Place's repetitions do *do* things. Sometimes they are re-petition: a demand reiterated, a way of refusing certain silencings. Doubling up the last words of the condemned to death could therefore be the renewal of the claims the dead make on the living, perhaps the most important of which is the demand not to be forgotten. It is worth noting that in both aforementioned mythological traditions, Echo continues to speak from beyond the grave. And yet, Vanessa Place's Echo revives only words, she does not rebirth subjects: the grain and timbre of individual voices are lost for good. When she pronounces all the last statements of executed offenders published in the online archives of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice website with no variation in intonation, accent, or rhythm which might allow the listener to differentiate one statement from the next, she effectively leaves the identities of those that originally pronounced them for dead.

Reprisal is also a form of response, just as Echo's repetitions of Narcissus's words were also replies to his questions. And when responses are ripostes, Echo's voice might signal the reopening of hostilities, often directed against the very discourse to be repeated, as in the *Gone with the Wind* project. Echo, then, as a combatant, and repetition, a weapon of warfare. This may be why Vanessa Place considers Echo a terrorist of the literary variety.<sup>[30]</sup> And, indeed, it has been said that Vanessa Place's repetitions re-perpetuate trauma.<sup>[31]</sup> This accusation poses the question of the function of poetry, or, more generally, the symbolic: is it to provide the purge of catharsis, to resolve conflict, pacify, and put at a distance? Or to wound again? In the *Last Words* Silencio performance, we hear "I hope this gives you closure" juxtaposed with "I hope you get peace and joy." "Closure" is exactly what the performance seems to preclude, perhaps because the question of joy, or rather of pleasure, is a thorny one. Rather than being purged in the cathartic fashion, Echo creates and maintains the conflict between terror and pleasure, and gives such conflict form, refusing resolution and its attendant relief. Her repetitions are in this case symptoms, our own symptoms sublimated in the symbolic, insofar as sublimation may be understood not as pacification but as displacement. In giving form to irreconcilable tensions, in refusing the transcendence of harmonious synthesis, such work retains the capacity to contest, rather than support, the prevailing cultural configurations of power.<sup>[32]</sup>

And yet Echo is powerless to give her language new direction, to tell you where it *should* lead to, to point to ideals to fight for or goals around which to organize contestation. Echo might repeat an order, but cannot deliver an order of her own accord, nor sketch the contours of a new order to come. Disorienting without reorienting, she is incapable of imposing an imperative of her own. This explains why "repurposing," as Duchamp described his ready-making, is a somewhat inadequate term to describe Vanessa Place's practice, for no new purpose emerges clearly. Her failure to clearly

direct reception is perhaps, however, where her deepest rebellion lies, as she refuses to propose new forms of mastery to replace those she destabilizes. If you're after a new ideology, she disappoints. Echo's poetry is, however, after-ideology<sup>[33]</sup>: she pursues contemporary ideologies, replicating them not from an imagined exterior position of knowledge, but from one of complicit, guilty dependence.

This is where repetition and social analysis meet. Echo throws Narcissus's words back at him otherwise or, more exactly, otherly wise. For the destination of Echo's discourse is also, in many cases, its origin: ourselves. In this sense, Vanessa Place's *Echo* could indeed be understood as a form of satire, an x-ray of a society in which rape jokes circulate on the internet, in which *Gone with the Wind* is a classic, in which people are condemned to the fantastical prospect of serving several life sentences on end, or, more realistically, to death. Echo's fidelity becomes disturbing precisely because we are obliged to admit that what she says is indeed what was said, but we didn't mean it to say so much. Her repetitions turn our discourse into our confession, betraying us as we are, in a certain sense. If we hate her, then, it might be because her faithfulness has made of her a traitor. Hence, perhaps, the violence of Narcissus's rejection of an I that, as Beckett well knew, is *Not I*.

That her poetry attempts to replicate our contemporary condition shows how much, as in the Greek myths, Echo is site-based, the reverberations of her voice depending on context. Vanessa Place's poetry sounds out and troubles the construction of aesthetic and political spaces. Echo can be used to measure the distance covered before the sound returns; she also tests where things can be heard and where they can't, such that her voice traces the dividing lines "sharing (out) the audible" that determines our contemporary aesthetic regime.<sup>[34]</sup> She has been criticized for acting outside of the art institution by those within it who feel that, beyond its frame and codes, critical distance is threatened.<sup>[35]</sup> According to this view, the obscene and displays of violence are confronting when exhibited in galleries and explicitly labelled as art, but degrading and unacceptably so when they are free-wheeling on the internet or performed on the street. She has also been criticized for transporting certain texts generated outside of the museum, the gallery, or the literary institution into such settings, for having us thereby hear their aesthetic qualities, which is the same argument read the other way. In both cases, Echo has us feeling the fact of beauty out of bounds. Her critics seek to shore up the boundaries of the art institution, which they rely upon to secure points of departure in order to restrict possible interpretative destinations, claiming autonomy and reflection for everything in between, so long as it ends up landing safely within these limits. Echo, however, plays with "where you are coming from" such that what we "get" at the receiving end can't be so easily policed. In asking whether there is any difference between pleasure (or discomfort) procured in different places, she lays dynamite along certain dividing walls. Or, at the very least, she points to their fissures, the leakage that makes context unmanageable, and, therefore, the limitation of meaning context promises, untenable.<sup>[36]</sup> If Echo's reverberations are place dependent, they're just as much about sabotaging enclosures. Echo's chamber is always open.

It is clear, then, why some might want to follow Plato's gesture and banish her and her poetry from the City. Indeed, Echo's position in structures of governance could only ever be liminal. Georges Didi-Huberman recently criticized Jean-Luc Godard's abusive superimposition of the right to cite and the right to citizenship in *Histoire(s) du cinema* — a confusion the homonymy of *droit de citer*, and *droit de Cité* in French accentuates.<sup>[37]</sup> Yet, if Echo's repetitions can be understood as citations, they show just how intertwined these two rights are. Citation and citizenship both call on principles of possession and responsibility, both of which require and found the stability of identity, and lay down the bases for the functioning of community. Deprived of property rights, Echo flouts property's responsibilities. Vanessa Place, like many other conceptual poets, refuses to cite sources, a gesture which further divests not only the original text but also her own speech of authority, as citation is the practice of calling up sources as witnesses, as evidence, to construct an argument. Moreover, Echo cannot be a resident, as she has no fixed abode; she cannot express her opinion (vote) because she cannot speak in her own name. Homeless and nameless, she is thereby disqualified from participating in any civic institution and excluded from decision-making. Her voice resonates from the exterior, preserving repetition's potential for corrosive irony against consensus.



But it would be too easy to allow the figure of Echo to shield the poet from all responsibility, to allow her figure to serve, once again, as a decoy for what's really going on in the backroom. For Echo escapes responsibility to a certain extent only. True, she claims to repeat what she hears, not what she listens to, and this implies a lower level of choice, given that hearing is less subject to conscious control than listening, promising greater chances of successfully bypassing intention and its police, such that an unacknowledged off-scene may suddenly emerge through gaps in normative surveillance. But she does exercise a level of choice in what she hears: in Ovid's tale, she chooses to follow Narcissus, whom she loves. Unlike other "unoriginal genii," Vanessa Place's Echo does not choose her object from amongst the quotidian, such as weather or traffic reports.<sup>[38]</sup> She prefers hot items: the legal defense of criminals, rape jokes, racist realist novels, the last words of death row convicts. The discourse she has elected is that of the suspect, the one we've designated as guilty, the one we're going to execute, the one we consent to push off-scene: the person and the narratives many of us would prefer to suppress to shore up our identity, to found our own innocence. Her project can thereby be understood as one which makes this innocence suspect, for the duration of her performance at the very least.<sup>[39]</sup> And for this choice, listeners hold her responsible in turn. Responsibility is therefore not evacuated, rather it is displaced onto the listening ear, whose interest in and complicity with the structures that produce this discourse is often uncomfortably bared.

Not only does she choose her object, she also decides where to subtract and truncate the language she hears. This is another difference between Vanessa Place and Ovid's Echo, who, once the choice of object is made, cannot decide whether she repeats, but "must speak / If any other speak."<sup>[40]</sup> Vanessa Place, however, does decide when to remain silent, what to excise, and how the remaining material is to be reorganized. The presence of an individual operating within the language repeated is thus clearly felt,<sup>[41]</sup> and, however slight the intervention may be, practices of selection, juxtaposition, and re-presentation have consequences on works' potential meanings. Vanessa Place's Echo draws up a partial account of our all-too-human artifact, and implicitly challenges us to call her to account for its significance.

For Echo places the critic in a quandary. On the one hand, her repetitions not only create the space for critique, they demand it, as the onus of interpreting the argument, refused by her, is shifted onto us. She would therefore seem to be the critic's delight. But she is no less the critic's despair. For how do you respond to an Echo? Do you set off in pursuit of the source so as to capture her song, dismember her, and erect a concept on her voice's phonic supplement? Do you try to rob her of the last word? Do you attempt to satisfy the frustrated desires of Pan for Echo or of Echo herself for Narcissus — that is, the desire for identity, for the union of the subject with his or her own sonic reflection in the glory of substantive bliss? Attaining such a goal would constitute a violently repressive identity, based on the illusion of mastery of the self with no difference, an illusion whose flipside is, paradoxically, the silence of annihilation. Frustrating such desire is the tragic condition of Echo's continued effects, and of all discourse. Perhaps the only position available to the critic is to try to get close, to partially repeat what has only partially been heard, in the hope that this repetition will be faithful enough to betray something, and dissymmetrical enough for some difference to emerge. For what it's worth.

1. See in particular Vanessa Place, "A Poetics of Radical Evil," *Lana Turner Journal*, no. 3 (2010): 96–106.

2. Vanessa Place and Naomi Toth, *After Vanessa Place* (London: Ma Bibliothèque, 2017), 36–38.

3. The choice of these two verbs follows Place and Toth, 48: "The radically evil leans towards ... a site of evisceration and exposure, in that order." Vanessa Place describes Echo as "pure malevolence," an "instantiation of radical evil" in the essay *ECHO* (Calgary: No Press, 2011).

4. Place and Toth, *After Vanessa Place*, 120.
5. John Hollander, *The Figure of Echo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).
6. Longus, *Daphnis and Chloé*, the Athenian Society translation (Cambridge, Ontario: In parenthesis, 2002), section 23.
7. Longus, section 23.
8. That Daphnis's tale and not Chloé's words is repeated by Echo seems to be a subject of doubt: translations differ on this account. Here I follow the French translation by Pierre Grimal, *Daphnis et Chloé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1958), section 23, 78.
9. William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 237. See also Hollander's analysis of the importance of Echo in Wordsworth's poetry, *Figure of Echo*, 19–22.
10. Karl Wilhelm Friedrich Schlegel, *Lucinde and the Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), 174.
11. Francis Bacon, *De dignitate et augmentis scientiarum*, trans. Robert Leslie Ellis and James Spedding (1605/1623; translated 1857), book II, chap. xiii, qtd. in Hollander, *The Figure of Echo*, 9.
12. Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman, *Notes on Conceptualisms* (New York: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2009), 20.
13. See, amongst a vast bibliography, one of the most influential texts on this topic, Jacques Derrida, *La Voix et le phénomène* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967). On this question, see also Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006).
14. "Sign" here is to be understood in the linguistic sense as the association of a concept and an "acoustic image." See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (Paris: Payot Rivages, 1967).
15. "un autre Pan, c'est à dire un homme plus universel, que je ne suis en toute sorte d'autres connaissances pour attraper cette fuyarde." Qtd. in Hollander, *The Figure of Echo*, 11. My translation.
16. See Véronique Gély, *La Nostalgie du moi. Écho dans la littérature européenne* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2000), 29.
17. Gély, *La Nostalgie du moi*, 34.
18. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. A. D. Melville (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2008), 62.
19. This restitution of the dialogue is based on two translations: the afore-cited translation by A. D. Melville, and that of A. S. Kline (University of Virginia Library Digital Production Group, 2000). Note that in Henry T. Riley's translation (London: George Bell and Sons, 1893), the last line of their conversation is rendered not as *yielding* but as *enjoying* the other.
20. Hollander, *The Figure of Echo*, 15.
21. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. A. D. Melville, 63.

22. Marjory Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
23. Patrick Greaney, introduction to *Quotational Practices: Repeating the Future in Contemporary Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), xi.
24. This distinction between Echo and the Imposter and the Unknowing Fraud is one Vanessa Place herself makes: Place and Toth, *After Vanessa Place*, 68.
25. I have engaged in a close reading of this work elsewhere. See “Echoing Last Words: Luis Canntizer, Vanessa Place, and critical dependency,” *Textual Practice*, forthcoming.
26. Kim Calder, “The Denunciation of Vanessa Place,” *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, June 14, 2015.
27. See also Greaney, *Quotational Practices*, 152–54.
28. See Hélène Aji on *Statement of Facts* as a failure to render linguistically and defend undefendable “facts” in “Un(Decidable), Un(Creative), Un(Precedented), Un(Readable), Un(Nerving): Christian Bök, Craig Dworkin, Kenneth Goldsmith, and Vanessa Place,” *Études Anglaises* 65 (2012/2): 162–180, 178.
29. For a more detailed description and review of this performance, see Naomi Toth, “Last Words / Derniers mots,” *Épreuves*, no. 4 (2016), fold-out supplement.
30. Place and Toth, *After Vanessa Place*.
31. Georgina Colby, “Engaged Disengagement: Reframing as Feminist Critique in Vanessa Place’s *Tragodia*,” *Textual Practice* 31, no. 4 (2017), April 26, 2016.
32. See the discussion of art as a symptom in Georges Didi-Huberman’s 2012 postface to the re-edition of *L’Invention de l’hystérie* (Paris: Macula, 2012), which has been translated by Carolyn Shread, and published as “Of Images and Ills,” *Critical Inquiry* 42, no. 3 (Spring 2016): 439–72.
33. Vanessa Place delivered a paper entitled “After Ideology” on November 6, 2014 at L’Expérience de la contingence historique dans les arts et la littérature (1914–2014), an international conference organized by Hélène Aji and Charlotte Estrade, Université de Paris Nanterre, France.
34. This expression is an adaptation of Jacques Rancière’s “*partage du sensible*,” which may be translated variously as the sharing (out)/division/distribution of the sensory realm. Rancière uses it to discuss the way aesthetic and political divisions in society function apiece. See, amongst other works, *Le Partage du sensible* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2000).
35. This is the critique Andrea Fraser addresses to Vanessa Place in the VSF panel discussion “Subject to Change,” with Andrea Fraser, Amelia Jones, Vanessa Place, Hamza Walker, Los Angeles, August 6, 2015.
36. Her performance can therefore be understood as staging, at least implicitly, the principal objections Jacques Derrida raises against relying on context to establish meaning, a critique developed most notably in his reading of Austin’s speech act theory. See “Signe, événement, contexte,” the essay which closes *Marges — de la philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972).
37. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Passés cités par JLG* (Paris: Minuit, 2015), 99–103.

38. Cf. Kenneth Goldsmith, *The Weather* (Los Angeles: Make Now Press, 2005); *Traffic* (Los Angeles: Make Now Press, 2007).

39. See Vanessa Place, *The Guilt Project: Rape, Morality and Law* (New York: The Other Press, 2010).

40. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. A. D. Melville, 62.

41. As Hélène Aji argues, such traces of an individual presence at work in the citational gesture in contemporary conceptual poetry allow us to read this work as an attempt to find “a *locus* for a locutor” in a context that might otherwise sadden us into silence, in which more explicitly creative speech might be seen as a too-easily gained satisfaction, if not distraction from the problem. Aji, “Un(Decidable), Un(Creative),” 178.