



by

Christopher Robert Jones

# I.

“What I mean by having

Something is the fantasy

That having is possessing [and]\*

That possessing is knowing”<sup>1</sup>

\*William Pope.L

Before my violin became a thing, it was an idea. As a child, my mother would read to me *The Musical Life of Gustav Mole*—the enchanting tale of a mole and his lifelong relationship with the violin. “Lucky the mole, born into a musical family.”<sup>2</sup> Baby Gustav’s introduction to the violin begins in his crib, where his father plays him lullabies while he claps along. As a young mole, Gustav gains an appreciation and understanding of the power of music by being surrounded by it. He learns to use it as a tool through which he is able to communicate with his friends and family. Hearing the book as a child, I identified with baby Gustav. I too was born into a musical family and my relationship to music began with my father. The idea of the violin, for myself and Gustav, developed at the intersection between personal and emulative desires. As a young adult, Gustav’s identity is formed around his aspiration to be a *real* musician and the desire to be perceived and acknowledged as a *great* violinist, but the final page of the book reveals adult Gustav to be the narrator and the story becomes a reminiscence of a life spent in emulation of identity and the seeming inability to be fully substantiated and validated by this external set of parameters. Gustav’s adult life is spent toiling and lamenting his inability to ever be good enough to perform with the *Famous Frogharmonic*.

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<sup>1</sup> William Pope.L, *William Pope.L: The Friendliest Black Artist in America*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Kathryn Meyrick, *The Musical Life of Gustav Mole*, (Swindon: Child’s Play International, 1989), 1.



I give my first recital.  
I feel wonderful.  
But something is still  
missing from my playing.  
My tutor says,  
“You were good, Gustav,  
very good, but –  
I’m sorry –  
you will never be a Frog!”

**Kathryn Meyrick, *The Musical Life of Gustav Mole*. 1989.**

[TEST: Hold the violin in the playing position by placing the shoulder rest between your left shoulder and neck so that it bridges your trapezius muscle and clavicle bone. Using the left outer edge of your jaw, press down on the chin rest so that the violin is held in place between your jaw and shoulder. Extend your left arm out underneath the violin body, keeping it in-line with the neck. If your arm is long enough so that your fingers reach past the chin, back and forehead of the scroll and can wrap over the top of the head and towards the throat—you're ready to use a full-sized violin.]

When I was 9, my arms were finally long enough to play a full-size violin. I remember taking the test and straining to get my little fingers all the way over the head of the scroll. I could barely reach past the back, but my teacher still let me pass. I was then allowed to gain access to and learn unabridged scores, performing them as the composer had intended. Graduating to a 4/4 violin also meant perfecting physical postures that were required in the classical method. The interweaving of physical maturity, technical training, and performing at a competitive level required the mastery of my instrument as well as the regulation of my physical body.

Each violin is hand-crafted. Because of this, there are subtle variations that cause each instrument to sound, feel, and look different. Finding the right violin involves playing each one individually, until you find the instrument that best suits your body. After testing dozens of violins, I finally found the one that became mine. It was made by Robertson and Sons, a reputable violin shop in Albuquerque, NM. I paid rent on my violin (with my mother's help) for 8 years before I was able to save enough money to buy it outright. I played my violin every day, and never let it out of my sight.

The history of the violin is not so much the history of an instrument, as it is the history of an object's positionality towards a sequence of social conditions. The question *Where did the violin come from?* is literally an unanswerable one. But the question, and its assumption of knowability, points toward the function of *regulation* in the way we understand cultural legacies. Musicologists have generally decided to agree, for

simplicity's sake, that the violin came from Northern Italy in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, but it is widely known to have already existed in folk traditions across Eastern Europe. This discrepancy probably has to do with the fact that the instrument that emerged from Italy became connected to the classical tradition and was therefore the most notable. The history of the folk instrument is not nearly as legible as its classical counterpart. Its indifferent position towards the emergence of a standardized historical record and burgeoning mechanical reproductive processes affected its ability to document, standardize, and reproduce itself.

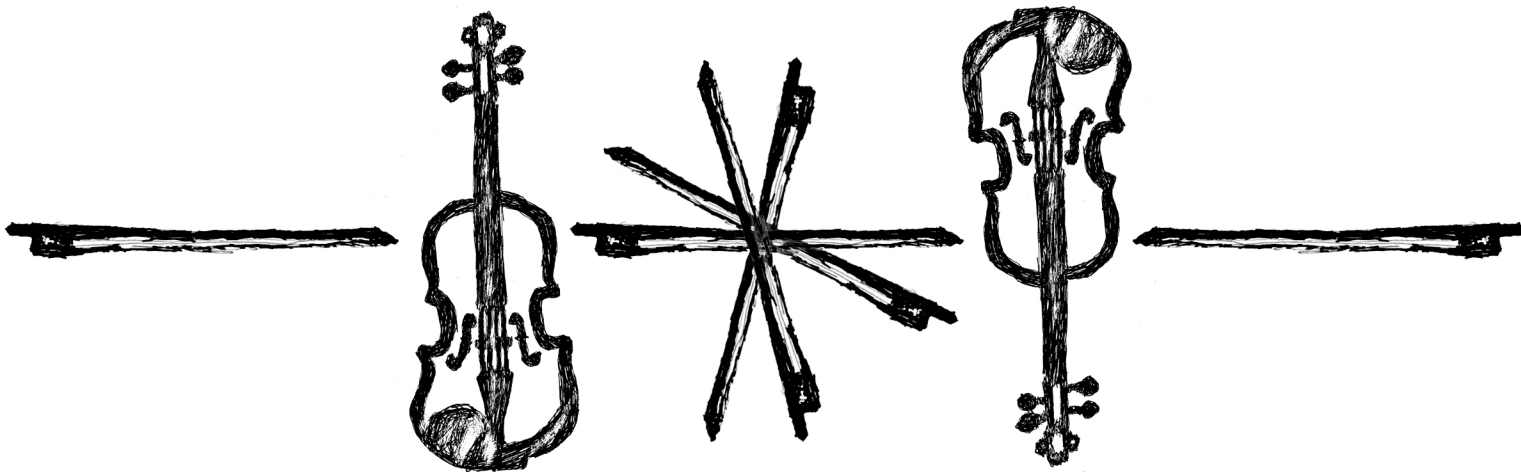
In 2015 I accidentally snapped the bridge of my violin while playing in a free-jazz ensemble. The bridge is one of the most fragile parts of the violin and an essential part of its anatomy. Its physical location between the f-holes and its placement in relationship to the soundbar has a profound effect on the instrument's ability to produce a *violin sound*. Up until this point, I understood my violin to be a singular and autonomous body; broken, it felt changed, unable to return to a state of normality or completeness.

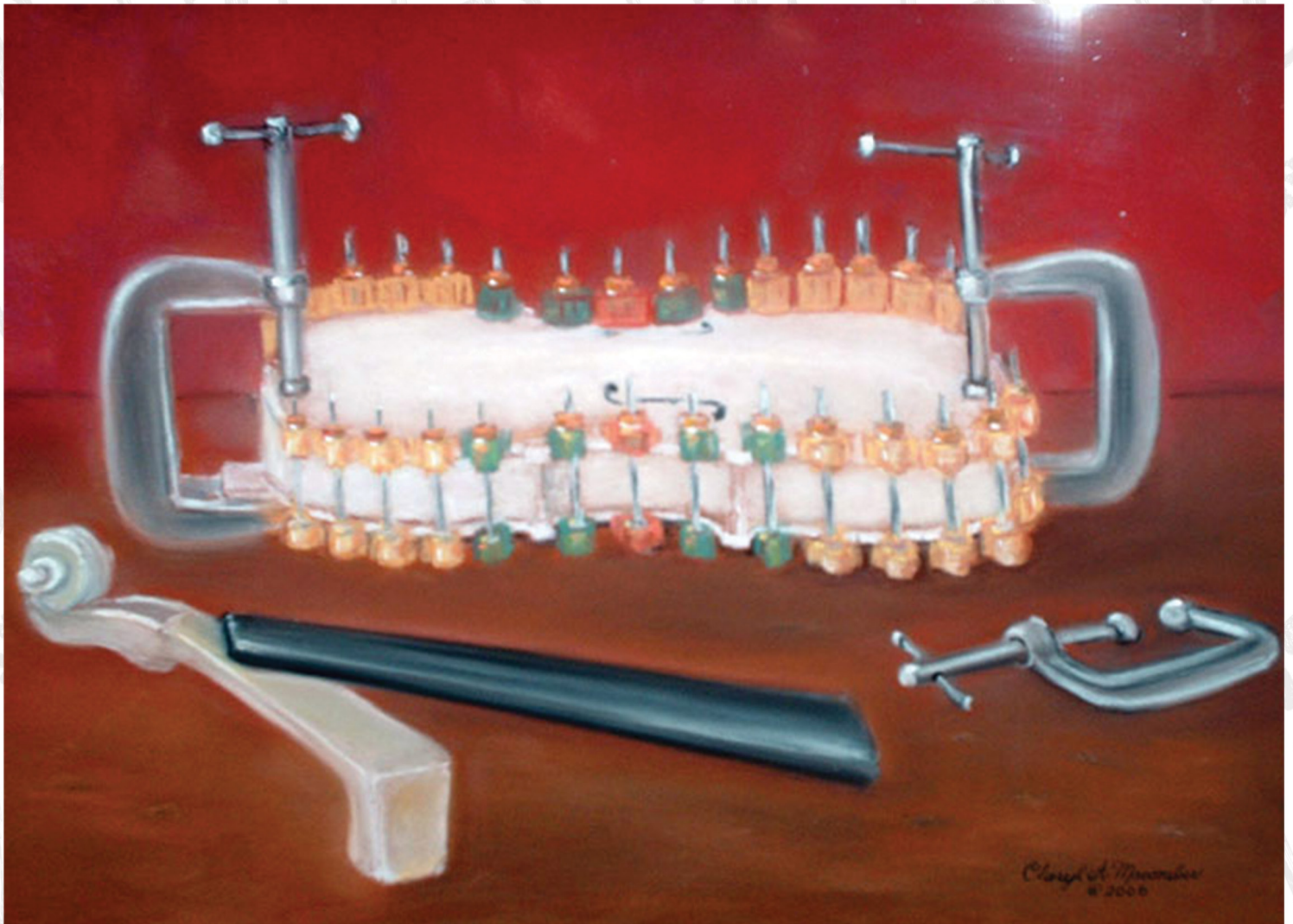
In a panic, I emailed Robertson and Sons asking to purchase a new bridge, perhaps one that was *self-adjusting*. They respectfully answered that there was, in fact, no such thing as a *self-adjusting* bridge because each bridge had to be carved specifically for each violin—by a master luthier. They suggested contacting the Federation of Violin and Bow Makers, which led me to Cheryl, a luthier and master instrument maker who ran a shop a few miles from my home in Sacramento.

Right away, Cheryl seemed suspicious of the circumstances that could cause my bridge to *snap*. Despite its fragility, there is no way for someone to *snap* a bridge through normal use, so I was obviously using the instrument improperly. Abusing it. Before this point, I had been operating under the assumption that the violin was mine to play, to manipulate, to adjust, to reconfigure, to re-contextualize, and perhaps even to break. Cheryl thought differently.

My conversation with Cheryl was revealing; her understanding of and relationship to the violin was shaped by its classical history and her desire to situate herself within that lineage. Whereas I used the violin as a means through which I could feel less limited by the constraints of my physical body. Our different orientations to the violin as a *thing*, enabled or inhibited its potential or possibility. For me, the tactility of playing the violin developed a sensory understanding between my body and the body of the violin, a co-defining. After training in the classical method throughout my childhood, I had quit out of frustration with how *uncool* I thought it was. I decided to play whatever and however I wanted. I assumed my violin would be amenable.

The violin, as a *thing*, is a set of parameters—a series of co-mingling parts in support of each other and tethered to a specific cultural/social/political stratification, a refined lineage. Cheryl's understanding of the violin was much more beholden to its history and this affected her ability to see beyond what that history had determined it could be.





Cheryl Macomber, "Violin Glue Up" c. 2007.

## II.

“But the story, really, is in the telling”<sup>3</sup>

\*Laurie Anderson

The violin as a subject, is represented throughout the western canon; from the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century onward, the violin regularly appears in works of painting and sculpture. Appearing first as a relatively demure and commonplace object within larger painted scenes, it quickly developed into a subject in and of itself. Its significance as a cultural object has much to do with the way it is used simultaneously as a referent for the human body and as a signifier for social and economic hierarchies. Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the violin’s popularity grew with the emergence of the middle class in Western Europe. Instrument makers, responding to the burgeoning new market, consolidated resources, developed more efficient modes of production, and standardized the violin’s anatomy, turning it into a stable and reproducible commodity—a *thing* framed by a set of physical parameters. This process of standardization increased its significance to European cultural identity and converged with its development as a visual symbol, making the violin iconic. This process of becoming iconic limited the violin’s development as an instrument; though the music it was playing changed, its physical construction was normalized. It wasn’t until the mid-1900s, when artists working at the intersection of compositional, performance, and conceptual modes started to use the violin to challenge the classical establishment and delineate the avant-garde. These modernist compositions often included the disfigurement, dismantling, or destruction of the violin body, in many cases *because* of its legibility as a cultural icon.

The artist Laurie Anderson, whose influential career spans from the late-1960s to the present, imagined the violin differently—using the instrument to bridge visual art, music composition, theater/performance,

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<sup>3</sup> Laurie Anderson, “Violins,” in *Laurie Anderson*, ed. RoseLee Goldberg (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000), 56.



storytelling, and filmmaking modalities. Emerging from the New York downtown scene in the mid-1970s, Anderson's work helped define the postmodern ethic of that time, one that promoted the convergence of experimental modes across varying art forms into what might now be referred to as new-media or multimedia art work. Anderson also used the violin to develop a distinctly posthuman critical framework, repositioning the violin as a dynamic intersection between emergent technologies and the human body. Anderson's work continues to address how our physicality is defined by digital space, positioning the violin as an active site for experimentation with and reconfiguring of the body, borders, language, and futurity. Her work asks questions that reveal the framework of our desire to have answers.

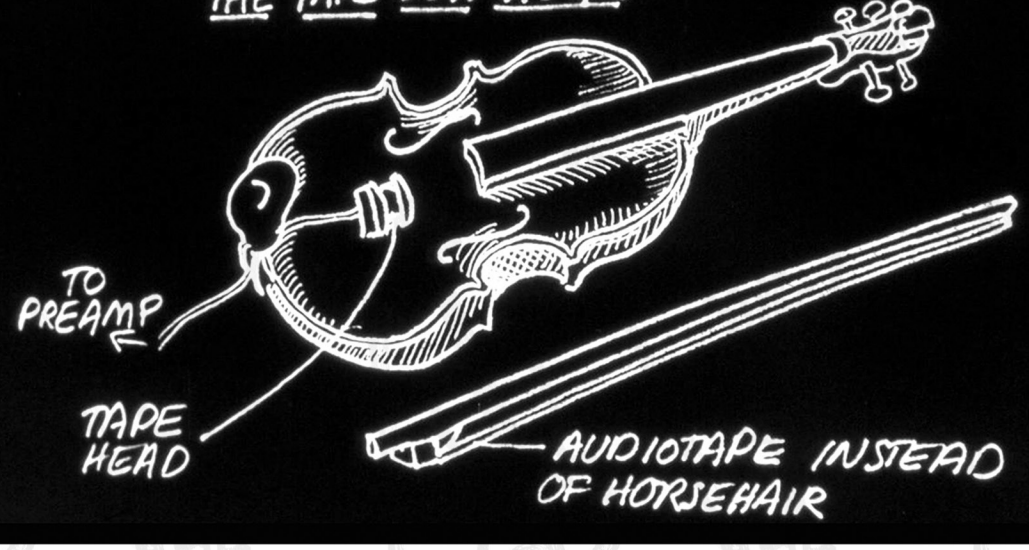
Though Anderson has used the violin in increasingly complex and dynamic ways over the course of her nearly 50-year career, the modified and fabricated violins that she produced in tandem with her performance works in the mid-'70s to early-'80s remain powerful gestures that continue to address contemporary notions of identity and body.

*Self-Playing Violin* (1974) builds on the lineage of conceptual and readymade works, calling into question the physical parameters of the violin's body and its relationship to the body of the human player. The traditional relationship between violinist and violin (one which dictates the material, auditory, and performance dynamics necessary to produce the classical violin sound) is disrupted and processed through electronic interfaces. The *Self-Playing Violin* does this through a speaker placed within the body of the instrument that plays a looped recording of the instrument itself, enabling Anderson to play a duet on a single instrument.

For the *Tape Bow Violin* (1977), Anderson replaced the horsehair of the bow with audiotape and the strings with a tapehead and preamp that played prerecorded information as the bow passed over the violin's body. Notions of past and future converge in the present body of the violin and are then challenged and expanded upon throughout Anderson's career; developing the violin as an active and dynamic subject. I am interested in



THE TAPE-BOW VIOLIN



Laurie Anderson, performance of "Tape Bow Violin" with "Drawing for Tape Bow Violin", 1977.



Laurie Anderson, "Digital Violin" from *United States*, 1983.

how these interventions interrogate the physical implications of the symbolic violin and reveal how boundaries and limitations affect the way we understand and experience the violin. Anderson's live performances activate the violin in unexpected ways, enabling the violin to be a site for the reconfiguration of its own limitations, rather than a repository for historical convention.

Laurie Anderson developed a series of violins as a part of her large-scale multimedia stage performance *United States* (1983), extending the conceptual implications of her earlier violin modifications. In the stage performance and the subsequent 5-LP *United States Live* (1984) record, Anderson uses song, still and moving images, textual and spoken language, dance and movement, and western symbology to create a portrait of America that addresses issues of boundaries and limitations that extend into the physicality of the human body and the communication modes that that body produces. Anderson's own physical body is extended by the violin and both bodies are modified and shaped by the incorporation of digital electronics and synthesizers. While the technology used in the piece feels distinctly contemporary, the ways the instrument (both the violin and Anderson's voice) are still connected to a system that determines their use, is not dissimilar from the classical origins of the violin. From the catgut strings used in early incarnations of the violin to the sample library of Anderson's *Digital Violin* (1984-5), the instruments, and their uses are intrinsically part of a specific social/political/cultural landscape. Anderson's work does not solve or absolve us of these problems of cultural baggage, instead it provides us with an opportunity to experience them anew and permits us to ask our own generative questions.

What is a violin?

What is a body?

What do they do?

What is their use?

### III.

“When logic that fixes bodily form to social practice comes undone, when narratives of sex, gender and embodiment loosen up and become less fixed in relation to truth, authenticity, originality, and identity then we have the space and time to imagine bodies otherwise.”<sup>4</sup>

\*Jack Halberstam

As a queer person, I have often struggled with the pressure of representing my difference. The process of *coming out* or *self-identifying* is framed as a rite of passage, one that promises community and/or acceptance as a consolation. It contains the implication that my existence might be made possible—or somehow *more* possible—by a defining term. If others are more easily able to perceive me, I become proportionally more deserving of their perception. When one is unable to make their body occupy a namable category, one remains in a state of perpetual reorientation.

As a child, the violin provided me with the visibility I desired; a means through which I could be understood, appreciated, and cared for. I used it as a vessel to contain the queer aspects of my identity that I could not comfortably situate within a normative body. I could protect qualities that were not distinctly straight or male by placing them within the body of the violin. By extending the network of my body, I was able to give voice to these non-normative facets of my identity, without jeopardizing my location within the hierarchy of normativity. Everything in its *right* place. As a result of this, the care, understanding, and appreciation I received was contingent on my continuing to fracture and externalize the non-normative aspects of my self.

The terms of this arrangement became complicated by two bodily malfunctions that occurred when I was a young adult. The first was the development of an eating disorder and body dysmorphia that would, over years,

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<sup>4</sup> Jack Halberstam, *Trans\*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), xii.

result in an inability to *realistically* perceive the conditions of my body. The second being a testicular torsion, and subsequent orchiectomy, that impacted my physical relationship to gender and sexuality. These events resulted in an increased discontinuity between my private body (how my identity, experience, and body come together) and my social body (how my body is perceived by others). While the shame connected to both of these experiences inhibited my ability to make them legible, my attention became directed to the ways in which my gender and sexuality were co-defined and how that co-definition shaped my perception of continuity or completeness related to my body. I was applying a normative framework that was limiting my understanding and ability to communicate these aspects of myself.

Through this process, my violin became a generative metaphor, a framework through which I was able to understand how the terms of my gender, sexuality, and ability were intertwined; allowing me to articulate where and how these distinctions intersected. Because my personal relationship to the violin was primarily connected to the experience of playing it—what I could play, how I could play, and what I could express by playing it—I realized that the playing itself was built upon a normative framework, as was my identity.

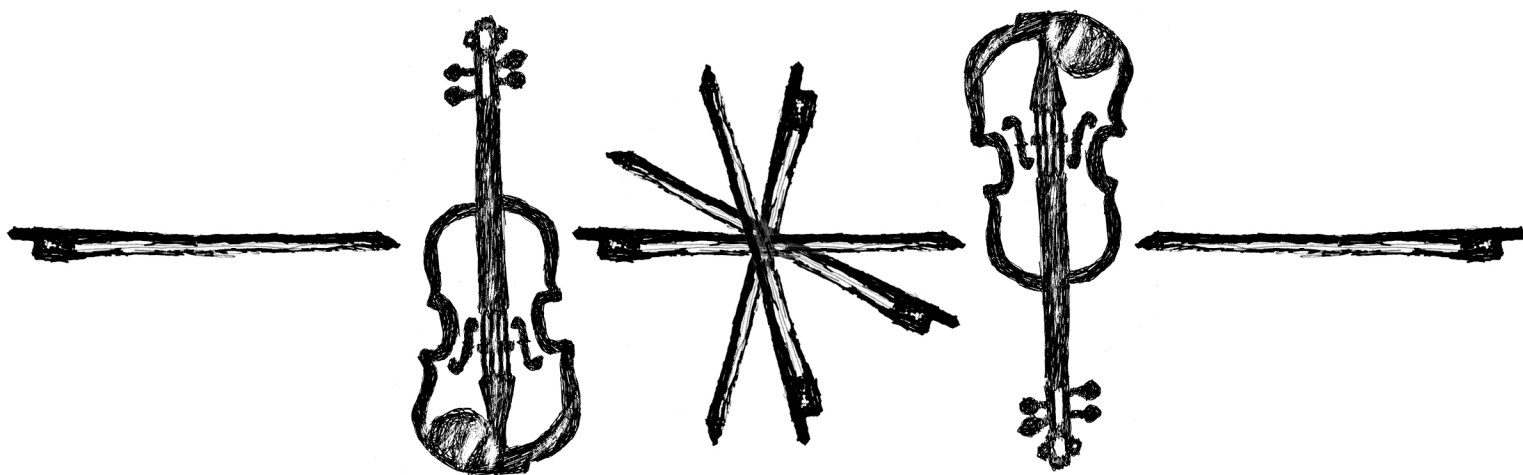
In the Crip Theory project, Robert McRuer focuses on the intersection of queer and disability concerns, aligning with what he calls a *gestural politics*—a politics focused on social relations in all their contradictions, complexities, and intersections. He places the notion of *gestural politics* in opposition to *emulative politics*, which centers on a representative model of identity (one that focuses inward on an identity to be emulated). *Gestural politics* is useful because it “constantly pushes outward, drawing attention to the hierarchies that structure the social on *all* levels...”<sup>5</sup> In many ways, Crip Theory developed out of a need to speak to the ways in which compulsory heteronormativity and compulsory able-bodiedness are intertwined. To use the complexities

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<sup>5</sup> Robert McRuer, “Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability,” Lecture, University of Hamburg, Hamburg, DE, December 23, 2009.

and contradictions that exist as a part of lived experience, to find points of connectivity across disparate identity distinctions.

The score tells my violin what to play. But who tells the score what the violin is capable of playing? When describing the origin of the violin, musicologists refer to the dynamic between the composer, luthier, and musician as key to understanding how the violin took shape. The composer would write the music that the musician would play; basing that music around a reconciliation between what they knew the musician's instrument was capable of playing and what they wanted to hear played. The musician would receive the score and realize that their instrument was physically incapable of playing certain aspects of it. They would then take the instrument to the luthier and explain what they needed modified or built so that they could play the score. The luthier would, in turn, tell the musician what they were and were not capable of building. The result of this network dynamic was the generation of a flexible set of agreements, one that was intended to be perpetually reconfigured.



## IV.

“Polite art does not let you fall into pieces.”<sup>6</sup>

\*Irena Haiduk

In January of 2013, I was beginning the winter quarter of my senior year as an undergraduate student at UC Davis. Unbeknownst to me, the blood vessels and spermic cord attached to my right testicle became twisted and over 3 excruciating weeks, the testicle died inside my body. A combination of misdiagnosis, shame, and social isolation allowed my condition to worsen until my testicle had bloated to the size of a softball. I was losing consciousness every few minutes and becoming unable to breathe from the pain. I remember lying in my bed as the swelling slowly increased, the pain preventing me from sleeping or standing up without passing out. I kept measuring the size of my testicle against the palm of my hand—Is it getting bigger or smaller? Could I reach my fingers around it yesterday? Maybe it gets worse before it gets better. What size is it normally?

In that foggy state, I mentally prepared myself for what I thought was the end of me. It is still difficult for me to understand why accepting death in that moment seemed more feasible than calling for help. I remember feeling distinctly trapped in my condition, unable to act in a way that might change the course of events, trying to separate from the material of my body.

When I woke up from my emergency orchiectomy, and in the months that followed, I became confused by the idea of *recovery*. Recover to and from *what* exactly? The understanding of my physical body felt permanently disrupted. The notion of recovering a cohesive and singular experience of physicality felt impossible and beyond that, undesirable. The malfunction of my body, and the resulting surgical intervention, had laid bare the threshold between the physical components of my body and the terms of embodiment. During this process, the

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<sup>6</sup> Irena Haiduk, *Spells*, (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), 117.



ways in which I understood my gender became disconnected from the physical parameters of my sex. To *recover* seemed to imply that I was somehow incomplete, that there existed, somewhere, a state of normality, completeness.

In Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli's essay 'Theory by Other Means: Pasolini's Cinema of the Unthought' she describes Pasolini's belief in a *radical otherness* or *radical alterity* and the ways in which he formed those beliefs into a critical practice, one that he employed throughout his personal and professional life. Biagioli argues that Pasolini's work presented otherness as an "...intense set of relations- an encounter between the senses, embodied perceptions, and material realities that produce a radical (desubjectified) affirmation of life."<sup>7</sup> His relationship to subjectivity as a changing set of relations, rather than a fixed point of view, is what would allow him to excoriate political, social, and cultural issues that defied simplistic notions of *liberal* and *conservative*. A fierce opponent to the neocapitalist politic that was growing rapidly in Italy during the 1960s and early-'70s, Pasolini advocated for the production of *extreme* artworks that would resist consumption by the neoliberal framework. No work of Pasolini's is more emblematic of that resistance than *Salò or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975), the last film he completed before his murder in 1975.

*Salò or the 120 Days of Sodom* is best synopsised by its affective power rather than a description of its plot. As a work of art, it reveals the contradictions within the western narrative convention, pulling the viewer slowly and excruciatingly through series of sections that attempt to represent the limits of humanity in order to "...reveal how the sacred myths of Western bourgeoisie are themselves based on the desecration of the sacred."<sup>8</sup> Through an affront to our moral sensibilities, Pasolini challenges the means through which cinema is in service of *thingness*—where material, form, and idea are conflated. *Salò or the 120 Days of Sodom* disabuses

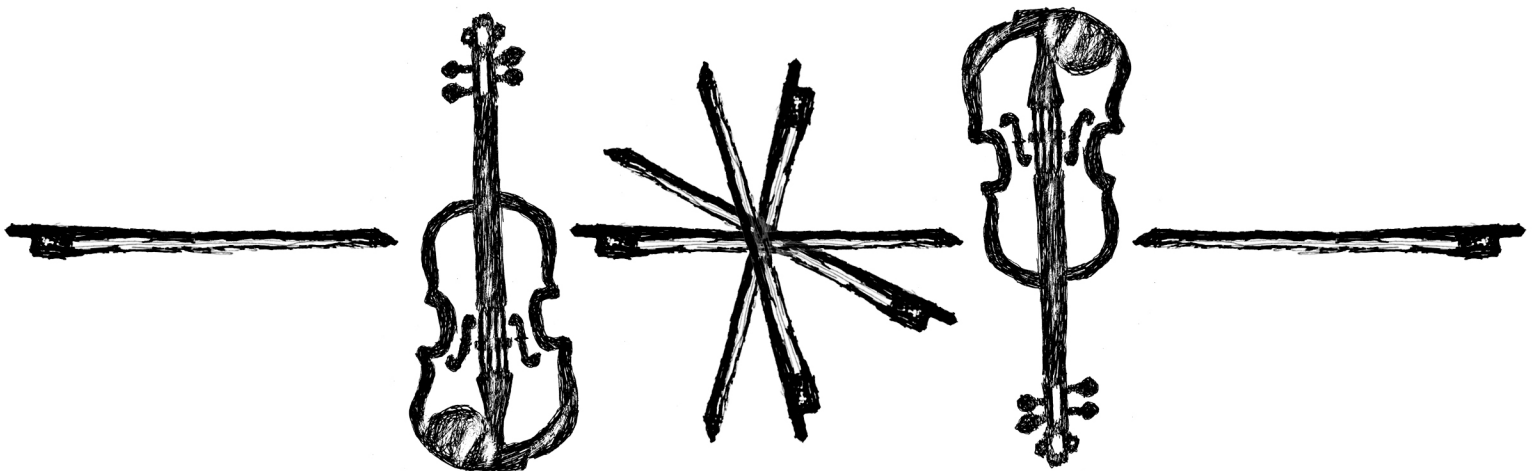
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<sup>7</sup> Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli, "Theory by Other Means: Pasolini's Cinema of the Unthought," *International Social Science Journal* 63, no. 207-208 (June 2012): 94.

<sup>8</sup> Ravetto-Biagioli, "Pasolini's Cinema of the Unthought," 103.

the viewer of the notion of a fixed subjective perspective by enabling a kind of *thought* through the “relation of actual images to filmic events”<sup>9</sup>. In this way, Pasolini generates an understanding of the body beyond the limits of its subjugation. By pulling away from the confluence of *reality* and filmic events and foregrounding its artificiality, we are able to better understand the role narrative plays in the formation of our subjectivity.

Pasolini’s notion of *radical otherness* explicates the ways in which difference must be activated—made generative, to dislodge it from the system of normative measurement. The ways in which my orchiectomy produced an embodied understanding of the gender/sex construction did not, in and of itself, change my orientation towards normativity. I discovered that I was able to be cognizant of my gender performance and still measure myself against a normative framework. The failure of my body provided me the vernacular of divergence but required me to continually delink from understanding the body as a cohesive and unified normative subject. A delinking that resists the delimitation of self by repositioning contradiction, complexity, malfunction, and ephemerality as forces through which difference can be mobilized. Continuously asking—how does one navigate one’s desire to know while preventing the terms of that desire from inhibiting what is able to be known?



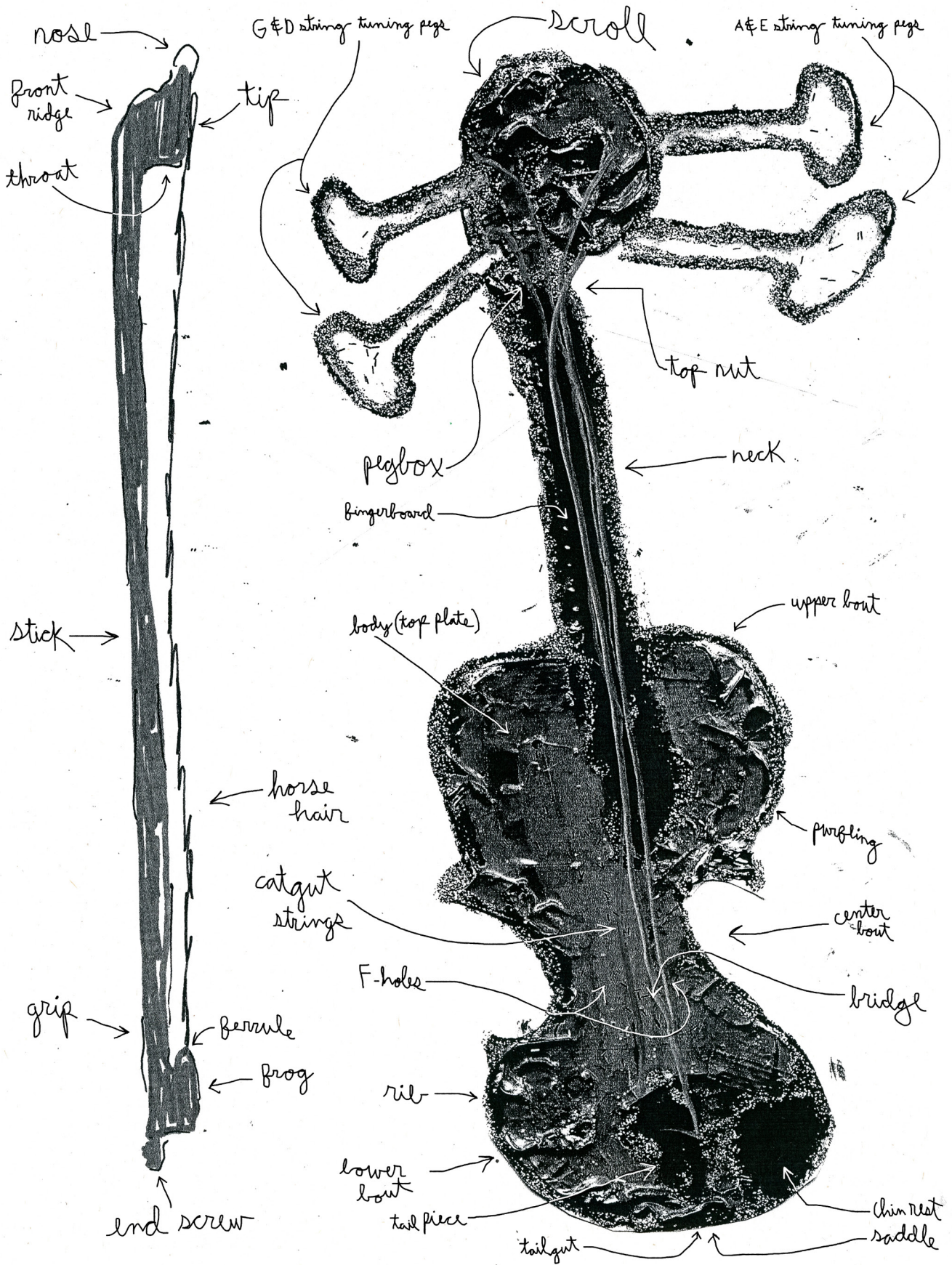
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<sup>9</sup> Ravetto-Biagioli, “Pasolini’s Cinema of the Unthought,” 103.



Pier Paolo Pasolini, film still from *Salò or the 120 Days of Sodom*, United Artists, 1975.

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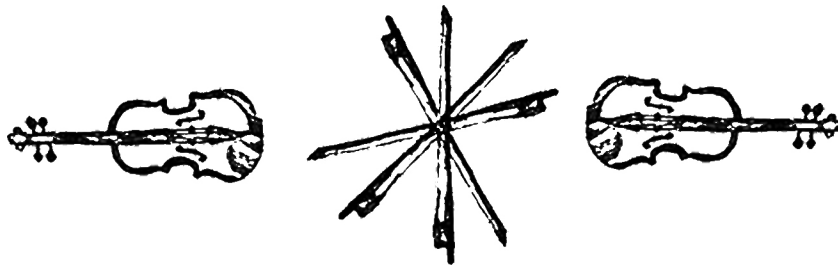




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