

# Intimate Papers: An Interview with Julia Polyck-O'Neill

Faith Paré May 4, 2021

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What struck me immediately in my chat with Dr. Julia Polyck-O'Neill is her attentiveness to relationality's many frequencies. Her writing on conceptualism's legacies and Canadian avant-garde scenes, particularly the Kootenay School of Writing, is necessitated by relations, whether building trust with her research subjects, or investigating the porousness between media and form in artists' interdisciplinary practices. I was thrilled to learn more about Julia's current research on digital and feminist interventions into preservation protocols for artists' archives, which she is pursuing for her postdoctoral fellowship at York University's Sensorium Centre. She was generous to share some of her revelations on archival intimacies, like being invited to pore over the private collection of poet Lisa Robertson, and oddities (including an archived pizza box!).

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**Thank you so much for joining us on the *SPOKENWEBLOG*, Julia! Can you introduce yourself not only as a researcher but as a listener? What sounds have defined you as a thinker, an artist, and a person?**

As a thinker, sound has influenced the conversations I've been so lucky to participate in; the sounds of other thinkers, either in-person, on the radio, or podcasts. When I've been challenged to teach unfamiliar subjects, as I did when I was teaching as part of the Obama Institute in the Department of American Studies at Johann Gutenberg University in Mainz, Germany, I was listening to podcasts like the ***BBC's In Our Time*** to enrich my reading of the materials. I found that listening added a layer of attention that helped me to absorb information in an embodied and sensory way.

I began my scholarly path as a visual artist. When I was doing my BFA at the University of Ottawa, I became fascinated by installation art. Sound actually plays a role in the installation, whether it's an intentional component or not. So you could have, for instance, Canadian artists ***Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's*** work that has a layer of sound in addition to a number of visual elements, or the work of Scottish artist ***Susan Phillipsz***, where the sound is the work itself.

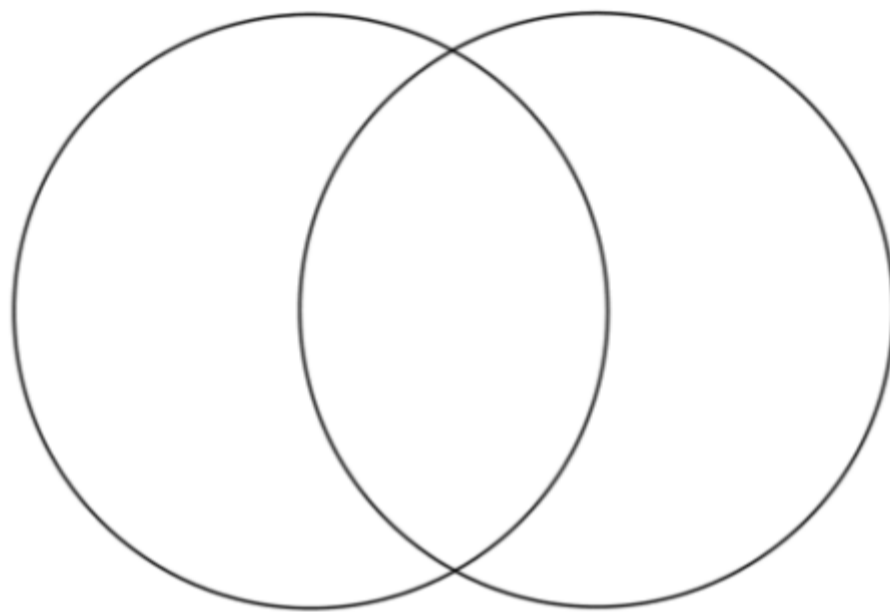
I love what I might consider the humanity to be found in sound, and thinking about recordings—or actually live, embodied performances—of writing and thinking, which can otherwise be quite sterile. I love how sound, especially live sound, adds a dimension of agency within the work. There's a sense of a real person being at the other end.

**I find it very exciting when scholars are also poets themselves. Your most recent release, *poem | image | self (above/ground press, 2019)*, is explicitly a "research creation project" in relation to artist *Adrian Piper's* conceptual work. What interests you about probing the boundaries between research and poetics?**

This is a section of Adrian Piper's essay "On Conceptual Art" that I come back to a lot: "I turned to language (typescript, maps, audio tapes, etc.) in the 1960s because I wanted to explore objects that can refer both to concepts and ideas beyond themselves and their standard functions, as well as to themselves; objects that both refer to abstract ideas that situate these very objects in

new conceptual and spatial temporal matrices, and also draw attention to the spatial temporal matrices in which they're embedded." These lines speak to my relationship with language and poetry as material practice, and about the different types of work that I do and their interrelationship.

When I initially began to write poetry formally, I was finishing my first year of the PhD, beginning what I now understand to be a rich apprenticeship with my supervisor, **Gregory Betts**, who is not only an accomplished academic but also an established poet internationally. My dissertation is about conceptualist writing and visual art in Vancouver, particularly in the 1990s and early 2000s. He encouraged me to start thinking about these questions on conceptualism in relation to creative work in addition to traditional research. These questions demanded hands-on investigation of the material interests and practices of conceptual art and writing, and how these creative modes are a way of working through complex ideas, much like research itself. Poetic writing addressed the often intangible or affective dimensions of my research. It was a method for creatively expressing my personal, material, and immaterial connections to objects, events, and texts that I was examining in my more formal written work, particularly in terms of objects and narratives that I was encountering in the archive.



*The cover design of Julia Polyck-O'Neill's poem | image | self (above/ground press, 2019).*

**Congratulations on receiving a SSHRC postdoctoral scholarship this year! Your project on re-envisioning the creation of and access to artist archives seems complementary to your dissertation. Can you tell us a little about "Potential Archives: Envisioning the Future of the Interdisciplinary Artist Archive in Canada"? What is the importance of artists assembling their own archives? What are you excited to explore and challenge in this research?**

In a postdoc project at York University in their **Sensorium Centre**, which I'm thrilled to undertake, I'll be challenging some of the norms of conventional archival practice to see how new digital archival methods and platforms might address some of the limitations of these traditions, particularly as they relate to interdisciplinary arts practice. I also see my project as a fruitful way to potentially collaborate with archivists, other scholars, and artists themselves on developing methods and protocols for addressing some of these issues, and possibly for uncovering other challenges in creating artists' archives.

One of the parts of the project has to do with why the artist would want to actually participate in the fabrication, organization, and administration of their archive. That has to do with agency; with the artist being able to make decisions about access and not only record but maintain these records for posterity in a way that corresponds with what they feel is their truth, as they wish to be

portrayed. In my experience, and from the perspective of my intersectional feminist practice, I think that only the artists themselves can properly decide which stories and which parts of their lives they want to expose and when, so the idea of permissions is important to me. The artist is their own best advocate and they best understand their own narratives, as long as they're able to convey them. These questions also come from working with living artists and writers. Just one of the outcomes of the project will be a framework that will be made available to artists for collecting their materials, and best practices in creating and maintaining their archives.

### **Why did you dive into the challenges of archiving? What questions were coming up again and again?**

One of my first experiences with an archive was while I was working on the artist **Douglas Coupland**. **His archive had recently been donated to the University of British Columbia**. UBC is a fairly large institution and has a lot of resources, yet they were very challenged to organize his archive which consisted of papers, photographs, and books, but also, famously, a pizza box that he'd written on, and a number of other similar objects. I'd finished my MA project about Coupland and I was still curious about this bizarre collection that UBC had acquired. I couldn't help but think of other smaller institutions and how they grapple with similar problems in acquiring collections, cataloguing them, or making them accessible. I fell in love with the archive in doing that work and in being able to actually meet with Coupland and talk about this collection.

The second experience that comes to mind is when I was hired as a research assistant by the **bpNichol Digital Archive**. It was a short project organized by my supervisor, Dr. Betts, in addition to the **Editing Modernism in Canada Project**. I, again, was confronted with an archive comprised of not only traditional texts and images, but now sound files and publications that came in little boxes or other three-dimensional formats. I was trained to use a book scanner, but that didn't necessarily compute for some objects. It was an experience where I started to really think about the capacity of the digital archive and the importance of metadata and data management. A lot of these issues weren't necessarily in the purview of my research assistantship, but I started to recognize the language in these more librarian and archivist-oriented conversations.

### **Learning more about your research on (and with) poet Lisa Robertson, I was struck by your thoughts on gender and the public versus the private in your consideration of the Robertson fonds at Simon Fraser University alongside her tenderly cared-for personal archive. What revelations on feminist praxis in research occurred to you by engaging with these collections?**

Certainly working with and getting to know Lisa Robertson has been a career highlight. She is a colleague and friend of my supervisor and she was interested in my research, particularly from the perspective of a feminist researching Vancouver's avant-garde, which can skew pretty masculinist. I developed this rapport with Robertson, so I had the opportunity to formally interview her. It was certainly a stepping stone for writing my dissertation about **the Kootenay School of Writing** and their relationship with Vancouver artists working conceptually.

Forming a relationship with my research subject is important to me so that there's a level of intimacy and trust developed, and an ethical understanding where people can create firm boundaries about what I share and what I don't. Robertson felt comfortable enough to share this otherwise unknown archival collection, and I think of this as what scholar **Linda M. Morra** calls the **"unarrested archive"**; an unofficial, un-institutional archive. She shared this with me, a small but intimate collection of papers and ephemera that her mother had accumulated, mostly from the beginning of Robertson's writing career. The books are inscribed to her mom. There are clippings from reviews that Robertson wrote for *The Globe and Mail*; appearances at literary festivals. **There's a list of the items in an issue of *English Studies in Canada***, where the article has been published.

### **Speaking of this research, can you give a teaser of your planned paper for the conference?**

The paper that I'm going to be presenting at the symposium will be a different version of that article. Access to, and then temporary possession, of this archive led me to theorize it in relation to the politics of Robertson's institutional archive at SFU where there are a number of layers of information: some are accessible to the public and to scholars, and others require special permissions. I'm thinking about this precious personal archive, which I deem a maternal archive, in relation to these different institutional layers of access. I was also thinking through how archival practice can be undertaken as an important component of artistic practice and expression, and how this developed alongside the institutional political interplay of conceptual art in Vancouver, where ideas of gatekeeping and governance were being creatively critiqued and played with.

It occurred to me that Robertson's treatment of her archives, and my treatment in response to them, are connected to feminist ethical material approaches to information in a way that's related to artistic practice. In examining these conceptual dimensions of the archive within Robertson's personal narrative history of the KSW, by means of our interview and her mother's collection, I was able to observe how creative and feminist approaches into archival practice are coextensive and reveal methods by which institutional memory has been creatively and constructively subverted in Vancouver's recent cultural histories. I also experienced firsthand the role that ethics, trust, and care can play in conducting research.



*Lisa Robertson at the Kootenay School of Writing, Vancouver, 1994. Launch of **XEclogue** on January 8, 1994 (18:22). [Distributed by PennSound](#).*

### **Finally, tell us a little bit about the audio clip you have chosen to present with your profile.**

I've chosen an audio clip of Lisa Robertson reading at the launch of **XEclogue** (1993). She's reading from "Eclogue VIII" at the Kootenay School of Writing on January 8th, 1994. The part of the Roaring Boys is read by some of the male members of the KSW and the part of Nancy, which is key to the text, is read by **Nancy Shaw**, to whom many parts of the work are actually addressed. It was unearthed in our interview that Nancy Shaw was an important part of this work and then, at the reading, there was this embodied performance by Nancy. She was a late member of the KSW who has passed away and is missed in the arts community in Vancouver. She was one of the most important links between the visual arts community and the more literary elements of the KSW, and was a dear friend of Robertson's.

In the atmosphere of the reading, there's laughter and a lot of evidence of good spirits even though it's a poetry reading, which can be sometimes very dry. You can also detect affectively the intimacy developed within the group in general, and the special relationships Robertson had developed with various members of the KSW. I want to thank **Jason Wiens** for pointing me to this clip because he thought that it drew out some of what I was getting at in my writing about Robertson and Shaw's relationship.

The clip is a great companion to Robertson's article "**The Collective**", which was also published in the **Avant Canada anthology**. In "The Collective", Robertson reflects on the general multivalence of the KSW's history and of her experience with the group. She writes, "myriad groupings of identifications and practices ripped through and animated the collective fabric. Part of what this new subjectivity showed them was the absolute profanity of happiness, and the existence of that happiness outside of duration." I feel that the clip speaks to this idea of happiness, specifically the "happiness outside of duration" she foregrounds here.

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**Julia Polyck-O'Neill** is an artist, curator, critic, poet, and writer. A former lecturer at the Obama Institute at Johannes Gutenberg Universität Mainz (2017-18) and international fellow of the Electronic Literature Organization, she is currently a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Postdoctoral Fellow in the department of Visual Art and Art History and the Sensorium Centre for Digital Arts and Technology at York University (Toronto) where she studies digital, feminist approaches to interdisciplinary artists' archives. Her writing has been published in *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* (The Journal for Aesthetics and General Art History), *English Studies in Canada*, *DeGruyter Open Cultural Studies*, *BC Studies*, *Canadian Literature*, and other places.

This article is published as part of the **Listening, Sound, Agency Forum** which presents profiles, interviews, and other materials featuring the research and interests of future participants in the 2021 SpokenWeb symposium. This series of articles provides a space for dialogical and multimedia exchange on topics from the fields of literature and sound studies, and serves as a prelude to the live conference.



**Faith Paré** is an undergraduate Research Assistant for SpokenWeb at Concordia University, completing her Honours Bachelor of Arts in English and Creative Writing. Her research interests include Black interdisciplinary poetics, Afro- and Indigenous futurisms, and archival studies. She is also a poet, most recently the recipient of the Quebec Writers' Federation's 2020 Mairuth Sarsfield Mentorship under the guidance of Dr. Gillian Sze.

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