FOR JONATHAN



INTERCOM! ISSUE 01

DECEMBER 2025

In loving memory of Jonathan Sterne. Friend, mentor, colleague, teacher; among so many other wonderful things.

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With Gratitude,
The Intercom! Editorial Board
Alex Blue V, Sadie Couture, & El Bush

FOREWORD

My favourite movie is Hear My Song (Peter Chelsom, dir., 1991). It tells the story of Micky O'Neill, a minor impresario facing eviction from the Liverpool supper club he manages, and from his relationship with Nancy, who he loves, but whose patience with Micky's inability to say the three words has run out. He settles on a plan to recruit Josef Locke, a famous tenor who, decades earlier, fled Her Majesty's tax collector for his native Ireland, leaving behind both a lucrative career and 1958's Miss Dairy Goodness, Cathleen Doyle, who also happens to be Nancy's mother. Micky wagers that if he can persuade Locke to return for one final performance, all will be reconciled.

He tracks down the tenor, upon whom the proposition weighs heavily. They stop to peer through a clouded window into a dimly lit room where a group of young women are rehearsing a traditional Irish dance. "Do you see those girls, Micky?" Joe asks. "Would you like to be responsible for their dreams?"

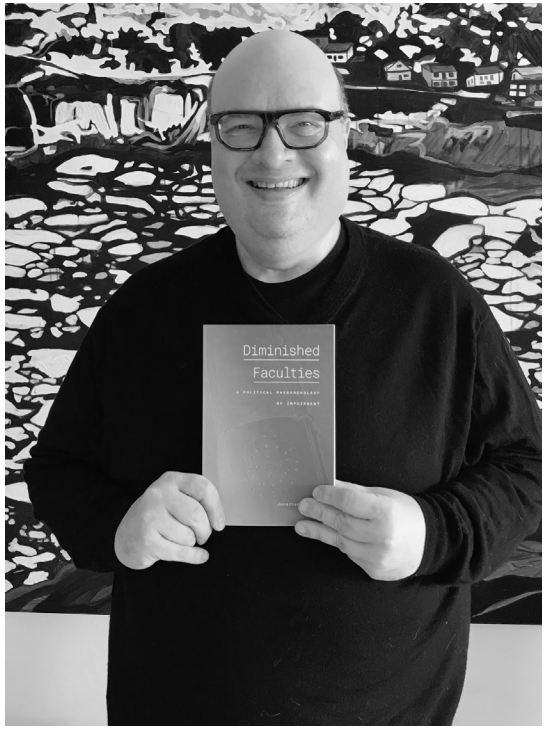
My friend Jonathan was responsible for the dreams of so many of us. Dreams of scholarship – dreams of what it can be and do, and what it can mean. The difference it can make. Dreams of places to do good work, places that are welcoming, exciting and supportive. Dreams of making a life of it. Dreams of friendship and generosity and kindness. Personal dreams and social dreams and political dreams. Rock and roll dreams. Better dreams, dreams of being better and feeling better. Dreams of intelligence illuminated by love.

He carried the weight of all these dreams and more. Who knows if he liked it? One thing is certain: we are responsible for them now.

In the moment before deciding to risk it all by crossing the water to sing once more, Josef Locke turns to his young companion and asks, "How do we want to be remembered, Micky?"

How would Jonathan have responded to that question? Reading through the beautiful contributions to this inaugural edition of *Intercom!*, dedicated to his memory, I think the answer is clear.

Darin Barney


Diminished
Faculties

A DECENT MAN

Will Straw

At first, I thought, my contribution to this volume would be a picture–a photograph of Jonathan and I at the end of one of the many, many doctoral thesis defenses in which we participated together over the twenty years in which we were colleagues. Defenses, of course, were occasions when Jonathan was at his best. Invariably, he would arrive with the thesis covered in his own notes, scribbled on paper or digital margins; then, as the event proceeded, he would busily jot down helpful comments to send to the candidate once it was over. It was easy for the rest of us to feel, in comparison, that we were under-performing.

I never found the perfect photo of Jonathan and I enjoying the celebratory moments that followed a thesis defense. Most of these images are buried in the social media feeds of successful candidates, rotating back into view on defense anniversaries. This happens often enough that I am regularly seeing Jonathan amidst clusters of people who have been part of our shared collegial lives.

It is one of the peculiarities of academic life that we work alongside someone for decades but almost never see them engaged in the principal activity for which they were hired–interacting with students. Thesis defenses are among the few instances in which we get to see some of this interaction. Every academic of a certain age has stories of thesis examiners who used a defense as the pretext for belittling a student or proclaiming their own grandiosity. Jonathan's participation in any defense was marked by energy, focus and intellectual magnificence but he was also, without fail, modest and generous. At the height of his fame and influence, he still treated each thesis as the chance to learn something new, each defense as a welcome opportunity for productive exchange.

A month or so after Jonathan left us, a friend asked me how his colleagues were dealing with the loss. I had retired in August 2024 and so was no longer working in the department that Jonathan had joined twenty years earlier. Still, my answer to the question was that it was not a matter of Jonathan having left our world but of us living now in a very different world shaped by his absence. Local scholarly or cultural events seem smaller without him, diminished by the fact that he is not there. Connections between different communities in which he moved seem fractured without his energy holding them together.

In my last message to Jonathan, late in his illnesses, I told him he was the most decent man I knew. To be sure, other scholars manifest some of the same virtues–generosity, risk-taking, a willingness to collaborate–but Jonathan never brandished these as proof of his own exceptionalism or imagined himself the radical outsider in a world of corrupted people and institutions. At the heart of his decency, I believe, was his clear-eyed sense of the stakes and possibilities of intellectual life and his deeply grounded commitment to improving these.

‘[EH,] DO WHAT MAKES YOU HAPPY’

Andy Stuhl

Something I always appreciated about Jonathan Sterne—and that I came to treasure and depend on in the time I worked with him—was a disposition I’ll call romantic pragmatism: a capacity to feel and act romantically toward the why of academic life by being extremely practical about the how. Jonathan’s pragmatism was a quality through which he granted me, like so many of his advisees, invaluable doses of clear-headedness throughout the murky course of grad school and a dissertation project. But I’ve also come to see it as the quality through which he was able to explain—or rather to produce a felt clarity around—the point of lifelong study in the humanities. There has never been a time when I felt more clear about why people do this than I did in Jonathan’s presence. (Time spent reading his work does remain a solid runner-up.)

The examined life; the lively conduit between critique and creation; the playful, rigorous exercise of real intellectual freedom (which, for him, necessarily meant the extension of that freedom to others); real community; the hard and delightful work of maintaining a capacity to be surprised; the delight in surprising an audience; ideas. This is some of what Jonathan and his collaborators showed could be won through this strange career in spite of all its variously lofty and belittled trappings. Jonathan’s formidable output as an academic (and musician!) was not the product of a ruthless pace or unhealthy work culture. It was the product, as far as I can characterize it, of the fact that he was doing what he loved and that he both asked for and gave himself the help he needed to get it done. He was proactively gracious, toward students and coauthors as well as toward himself, when illness and other life events interceded in projects. When life got out of his way, he would Get Things Done™; he was as keen a critic of Silicon Valley-style productivity culture as anyone, but he didn’t let that excuse him from pressing the time-management tactics that worked for him into service. In meetings, for instance, rather than promise to put a word in with so-and-so at the next chance, he would simply send them an email on the spot.

And he loved to write. He knew how to push ego aside and crank out “shitty first drafts” (from Ann Lamott’s advice that he re-shared prodigiously). His core belief about how writing happened was “ass in chair,” as he put it. He knew how and when to get good feedback, and I’m sure it didn’t hurt that he ran an inexhaustible surplus as far as any balance between feedback-giving and -soliciting was concerned. Compunction, in short, did not stand a chance. He often credited his productivity to “procrastinating on work with other work,” which on one hand sounds like a capacity you’d have to luck into; on the other hand, it can only be the result of a hard-fought campaign to arrange one’s life and career on one’s own terms. There was a lot to learn in witnessing Jonathan’s habits as a scholar, to be sure, but the advice was where his sharpest pragmatism shone through. You could come to him with a nebulous mess of hopelessly interlocked and life-encompassing dilemmas; he would hear you, then rephrase what you had said in a way that revealed a single, usually pretty material, knot at the midst of the nebula, the decision that had to be made first (Do I say yes to this teaching opportunity? Do I choose this conference or the other?). And then, mostly just through his contagious optimism, he would nudge you in the direction of contemplating the bigger vista that waited for you at the other side of having made your decision.

Jonathan’s advice, like all his ideas, could unfold as you mulled it over from stark simplicity into something that contained both nuanced applications and long-term perspective shifts. The quintessential piece of Jonathan advice in that regard was a refrain he dispensed frequently and (deceptively) casually—and that sprang right out in his voice when I saw Carrie Rentschler had worked it into her beautiful obituary for him: *“do what makes you happy.”*

Grief is the best teacher. But, grief being the best teacher is quite maddening, because Jonathan is the best teacher too.

Meesh Sara Fradkin



This photo is from an impromptu synth lesson Jonathan gave to a few of us students at his and Carrie Rentschler's place in the Fall of 2022. Amidst wine and copious amounts of curry that he bought for all of us, we took turns making a bunch of noise, while Jonathan patiently gave us direction while also explaining in detail how everything works. Jonathan had a heart of gold, has been one of the best teachers I've had, always simultaneously asking the best questions and somehow cracking a joke at the same time. May he live on in his work, among the people he brought together, and in these memories that we share.

Sabrina Ward-Kimola

THE WORLD AS SOMETHING TO WORK WITH

Li Cornfeld

At the end of my first year of grad school, Judith Butler came to visit McGill (please forgive the not-quite-Haraway-hot-tub reference here).[1] Following an IGSF reception, Jonathan was tasked with escorting Butler someplace, and since he and I had plans to go to a cafe after the reception, he asked if I would join the two of them on the walk. "You can tell Judith Butler about the otters," he said. I did not want to do this.

"The otters," as we had come to call them, were images that I was posting to a Tumblr I'd started earlier that school year. The blog was a joke: I would take critical theory quotations about the concept of "the other" and introduce a punny substitution. With apologies to De Certeau, I'd officially titled the blog "Discourse on the Otter." The inaugural post, however, had been a Butler citation: "One is undone in the face of the otter."[2] (One is undone in the face of the otter! They have very cute faces.)

As we made our way down Saint Catherine, Jonathan kept waiting for me to bring up the blog. I kept not bringing up the blog. Finally, he rolled his eyes, just a little, and mentioned it on my behalf. *"Oh yes I've seen that one," said Judith Butler, "it's very funny."*

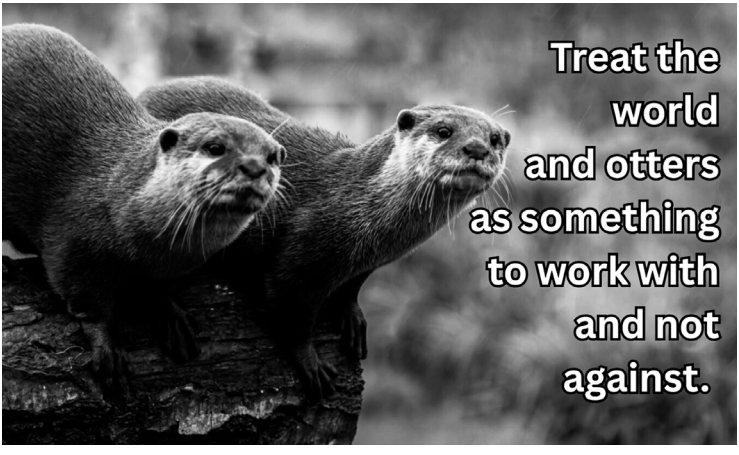
I think I let out a sort of stunned squawk, maybe accidentally uttering the very sound an otter makes, and Jonathan looked at me and beamed. I took this to mean that he was proud of the otters (which I already knew, because a week or so earlier, at our McGill-mandated annual check-in, he had listed, among my accomplishments for the year, "invented a meme.") But I took his look to mean something else, too: he wanted me to understand how thoroughly appropriate and totally wonderful it is to approach thinking as a kind of play. He encouraged this in all of his students, in whatever ways playfulness worked for each of us, otters or otherwise.

After we dropped Butler off, Jonathan and I went to the cafe as planned, where we sat outside and had a non-McGill mandated check-in. I don't know if I understood then that this is also something he was teaching me, about generosity and responsibility, and how a job where you get to talk with people about their unfolding ideas is a special kind of pleasure. We talked that afternoon about what I might read over the summer (not something about which the official forms inquired, I guess) and many of those texts received otter shoutouts.

I kept up the blog through my comprehensive exams and after, though at some point my posting slowed, and internet habits changed, until eventually, when the otters came down in a Tumblr purge, it took me ages to notice. If the WayBack Machine is accurate, by the time Jonathan published *Diminished Faculties*, the otters had been dormant for some time. Did I send him an otter directly? Data only exists if it exists in three places, Jonathan liked to say, and I can't seem to find a *Diminished Faculties* otter anywhere.

For this inaugural issue of *Intercom!*, then, here are some newly-created Jonathan otters. The first is from *Diminished Faculties'* introductory chapter, where he aligns impairment phenomenology with a disability politics that does not insist on self-idealization.

I'm also including an image that corresponds to his call, at the end of the book, for work that engages in worldbuilding, undertaken with love.



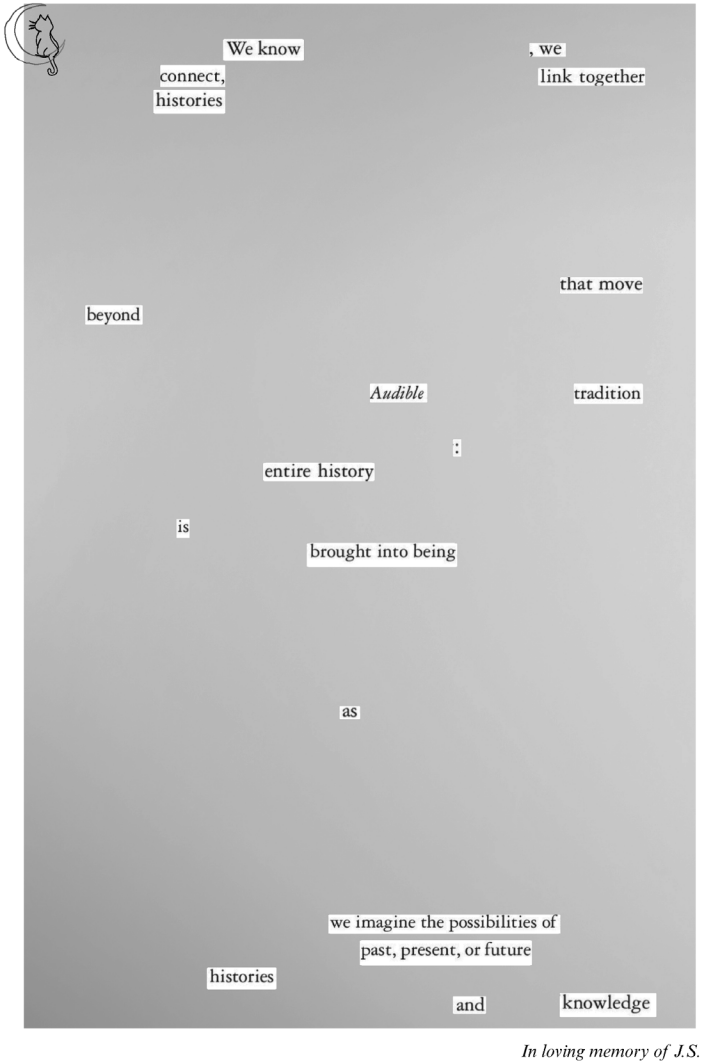


1. A footnote about a footnote, and its digital mutations: in September 2025, Googling "Donna Haraway Judith Butler hot tub reference," as I just did, yields an AI overview that describes an "academic urban legend" in which either Butler or Haraway footnotes a conversation with the other in a hot tub—and attributes the circulation of this rumor to a 2009 blog post by Jonathan Sterne! The AI overview notes that no such citation exists and that Sterne himself questioned whether his memory was accurate. Of course it was: see Judith Butler, Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex" (New York: Routledge 1993), p357, note 44.

2. In the beginning, Elise Amend was also a progenitor of the otters.

Abundance

Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past*
(2003)



In loving memory of J.S.,
-Mai

Mai Ababneh

I first met Jonathan in my intro to communications class, but it was his disability studies class that made me adore him.

There, in that small room in the arts building, the students felt safe to express their disability. Many people came cuddling a stuffed animal (as we know, he loved them as well), and as someone who was only just accepting their disability, I felt uniquely safe there. I loved learning about disability theory and disability as a strength and a concept, something completely out of society's lens, something I could be excited by.

I asked Jonathan for a reference letter when I was about to graduate university. I knew I wanted to start postgraduate studies, and I thought a recommendation from him would be an honour. I received it, and that was our last correspondence. I wish I told him I got accepted to postgraduate studies with a full scholarship. I wouldn't be there without him.

My other referee was also teaching at the school because of Jonathan's influence. I wouldn't be here without him.

I dedicated my dissertation to him. Everything I achieve after that is because of him. Because I wouldn't be here without him.

Thank you Jonathan.

For everything,

and more.

Sienna Edwards

PHENOMENOLOGICAL PEDAGOGIES

Laine McCrory

In the last few months, I've been thinking seriously about pedagogy. These thoughts inevitably led to Jonathan Sterne, a prolific writer, thinker, mentor, and instructor whose commitment to pedagogy went above and beyond.[1] This commitment led me to the road I am on today, and for that I am deeply grateful. This fall I began a doctoral program where, for the first time, I am responsible for teaching students about what I've decided to dedicate the rest of my life to. It's a relatively new experience, and one that comes with great power. More significantly, I've been thinking about a phenomenology of pedagogy and how I am coming into being as a teacher, leading me back again to Jonathan Sterne's legacy.

In *Diminished Faculties*, Jonathan troubles the distinction between phenomenology as a discipline defined by "the aesthetic of an immense quietude, and a satisfaction of basic desires and needs" (Sterne, 18). This aesthetic relies on the emergence of a "great thinker"[2] through reflection and reason–or, for Hegelians, mutual recognition–where space for peace and reflection is signified by this quietude. Yet silence is near-impossible for those whose existence comes into being without this quietude. For Sterne, this phenomenology is political and a domain of power. Jonathan's phenomenology of impairment instead builds on the works of those working against these narratives of great men, instead locating existence within "ambiguities, contradictions, fragments, webs" (Sterne, 19). From this account, a political phenomenology sees the moment of orientation (Ahmed, 2006) as resulting from a relationship to power rather than a practice of independent reflection.

What does this political phenomenology have to do with teaching? Foucault and Deleuze would likely emphasize the role of the intellectual as one that is tied to power, both as a tool that produces knowledge and a mechanism that reifies the importance of the academy itself (Foucault and Deleuze, 1973).[3] Drawing on this thread, a phenomenology of intellectuals as teachers critically examines how power and influence function, not solely through the written word or public lectures but in the day-to-day interactions with students. A political phenomenology, therefore, sees the teacher come into being not through quietude, but through the unpredictable lack of silence that is inherent in teaching itself. A political pedagogy is engaged, informed, inquisitive, and curious. These are all things I learned from Jonathan Sterne. His approach to teaching, whether in a high-level seminar or an introductory course, was a clear embodiment of disorientation as a practice that is "not only about 'how we find our way' but how we come to 'feel at home'" (Ahmed, 7).

Jonathan's courses were characterized by "credos" that set the tone of the class as one that emphasized how contradiction was integral to learning, as contradiction can be used to imagine a better world. He made the classroom a space to feel at home for his students.

Sarah Ahmed ends *Queer Phenomenology* with a reflection on disorientation:

> *The point is what we do with such moments of disorientation, as well as what such moments can do— whether they can offer us the hope of new directions, and whether new directions are reason enough for hope (Ahmed, 158)*

To say that Jonathan Sterne's passing was a moment of disorientation would be an understatement. Yet as I revisit both *Diminished Faculties* and *Queer Phenomenology* concurrently, I find myself thinking about this notion of disorientation as feeling at home.

Seeing a phenomenological understanding of teaching transitions from seeing the academy as not just a space to impart knowledge, but a space where disorientation is centred, where my students and I are encouraged to both look back on the past while retaining "an openness to the future, as the imperfect translation of what is behind us" (Ahmed, 178).

To me, this is where the reverberations of Jonathan Sterne – as simultaneously a legendary academic and life-changing instructor – can be found. Jonathan's deep commitment to a pedagogical project that was personal, political, exciting, and disorienting is one that I will keep with me forever. Every student who was lucky enough to learn from Jonathan holds these commitments and passions and will for decades to come.

1. There are many examples I could point to here, but one in particular can be found in his commitment to revisiting pedagogical approaches constantly.

2. Jonathan and I shared a significant doubt on the idea of the "great thinker," which led to many great conversations about the nature of scientific knowledge.

3. Specifically thinking about their discussion on the newfound role of the intellectual: "Intellectuals are themselves agents of this system of power-the idea of their responsibility for "consciousness" and discourse forms part of the system. The intellectual's role is no longer to place himself "somewhat ahead and to the side" in order to express the stifled truth of the collectivity; rather, it is to struggle against the forms of power that transform him into its object and instrument in the sphere of "knowledge," "truth," "consciousness," and "discourse." (Foucault and Deleuze, 1973)

Flexible Assessment. Since 2020, I have been using flexible assessment. During add/drop, you will be given an opportunity to select alternative weightings for some of the assignments. If you simply want to stick with the weights given to assignments, you don't have to do anything. If you want to change the weights given to the assignments, you must make your selection on a form (https://forms.office.com/r/1yZ7c9Qsmm) by the end of add-drop. Making no selection is equivalent to selecting the weights given on the syllabus. After add-drop, no changes will be allowed, no exceptions. WARNING: only do this if you are absolutely certain you want to do it. Some students find they want to emphasize the keeping up and basic comprehension part of the course; others want to emphasize the more integrative and creative work that goes into the paper. I recommend you talk it over with someone else before you do this; or you may check in with me during office hours. I will say a few things about the assignments before add-drop is over and you have the assignment sheets already.

Disabilities and Access Needs: Your professor has disabilities. Maybe you do too? If so, please come talk with me. To discuss an access need or request a specific accommodation, send an email to me before the end of add-drop with the subject line "COMS 210: Access Needs," and include a paragraph discussing what kind of access needs you have. You are also invited to just come talk with me in office hours. Students are welcome and encouraged to work with the Office for Students Accessibility and Achievement at McGill (formerly called the Office for Students with Disabilities or OSD) 514-398-6009 voice; https://www.mcgill.ca/access-achieve/). BUT: you are *also* welcome and encouraged to just approach me directly regarding any disability issues, without prior contact with the OSAA or a medical professional. I teach a course on disability, have published on disability and impairment and continue to research in the area, and am generally very comfortable talking about the subject. All access arrangements for COMS 210 need to be formalized in writing early in the term; it is much more difficult to provide retroactive accommodations in a fair manner.

Class Credos

More than one thing can be true: cultural analysis only works if it is possible to hold onto apparently contradictory ideas at once, and explain how they can both be true in specific circumstances. A contradiction is not a paradox: human beings are complicated and culture is messy.

No bullshit: we will avoid easy, prepackaged explanations of complex phenomena, and we will greet the claims of interested parties as open to interpretation and analysis. We will also not bullshit one another. However, your professor will occasionally delight in pointing out media industry bullshit.

You have the right to be wrong: part of learning is changing one's own perspective. This is only possible where ideas can be expressed and challenged, and people are allowed to change their minds. But: no "devil's advocates" will be allowed—if you present a position, it will be interpreted as honest advocacy for that position.

"WE WILL NOT BULLSHIT EACH OTHER"

Allyson Rogers

In the syllabus for his introductory course on Communication Studies, Jonathan writes that the course is designed to help students become "better citizens of reality." As such, a ground rule he lays out is that there will be "no bullshit" in the classroom, that "we will not bullshit one another," and that "no devil's advocates will be allowed (see: no bullshit)." While the explicit no bullshit clause seems to be a recent addition, the sentiment is already there in Jonathan's earlier syllabi. It is evidence of a longstanding attempt to at least attenuate the level of bullshit in class, and steer students in a different direction. This is significant, at least it is to me, given that "flooding the zone with shit" is an avowed strategy of the current generation of fascists, and according to philosopher Harry Frankfurt, bullshit is "one of the most salient features of our culture," and something we accept as normative, unexceptional, and largely inescapable. Jonathan's no bullshit credo speaks to the community of learning he wanted to cultivate, and the commitment to social responsibility that was at the heart of his pedagogy.

Bullshit is tricky terrain, and there are many species. While it can be difficult to define, psychologist John Petrocelli offers a useful description of bullshit as "communication with little to no regard for evidence, established knowledge, or truth." It lurks everywhere, and is nearly impossible to avoid. For instance, opinions and beliefs are not bullshit by definition, but they may be based in bullshit; and in cases where evidence is difficult to obtain, people may understandably trust and reiterate bullshit explanations. Bullshit is pernicious because it often implies, but does not contain meaning; it has a familiar syntactic structure, yet says nothing. However, as I read it, Jonathan is more concerned with intent, with bullshitting. Students have "the right to be wrong" as per the syllabus, but mistakes should be sincere.

There are important distinctions between bullshitting and lying. A common assertion is that liars are invested enough to discern what is true or false in order to deliberately mislead others, whereas bullshitters are unconcerned with the veracity of their claims, and may or may not know if what they're saying has any basis in reality. Crucially, purveyors of bullshit simply don't care. Jonathan most definitely cared.

Jonathan was joyfully serious about scholarship, and taking it seriously requires an earnest investment in the process. By pre-empting devil's advocates, Jonathan asked students to invest in their ideas, and to be accountable to their colleagues, as opposed to allowing so-called bull sessions where participants merely try on thoughts and attitudes "to see how it feels to hear themselves saying such things and in order to discover how others respond," as Frankfurt describes them, and "without it being assumed that they are committed to what they say." Typically, bullshitting is self-interested, and used to bolster one's reputation, obfuscate arguments, or otherwise one-up one's colleagues.

At its core, "we will not bullshit one another" resists cynicism, and carves space for sincere inquiry and critical reflection. Jonathan asked his students to show up earnestly, to listen generously, and to care about their ideas, their work, and their colleagues. He also encouraged students to be creative, and to never pass up an opportunity to make "the cheap joke" to draw people into their work. It's not easy to cultivate and maintain this kind of joyful seriousness (everyone say "kittens"!), however the no bullshit policy is proliferating, and already showing up in a new crop of syllabi in his honour.

[Harry G. Frankfurt 2005; John V. Petriocelli 2018; Gordon Pennycook et al. 2015; Alison MacKenzie & Ibar Bhatt 2020; Sterne 2023]

JONATHAN'S VOICE

Mehak Sawhney

Dedicated mentorship not only teaches one the craft of producing meaningful scholarship, but also initiates a chain of reproducing intellectual generosity and advice - acts that involve intention on the part of both mentors and mentees. Many of us have acquired, learnt and adopted many of Jonathan's innumerable and infectious qualities, making them our own. Over the past few months, I have thought a lot about how to pay forward so much that Jonathan gave us. What I had not anticipated was how deeply my subconscious had attuned itself to 'Jonathan's voice' that now appears anywhere, anytime, unbidden - while writing an email, talking to a student, or sharing a mundane account of my day with a colleague. It feels as if my mind had stored so much more of Jonathan's mentoring presence than I realized. I am reminded of something Jonathan said just before our last goodbye, "I would have loved to talk more, but I keep shutting down." The experience of listening to Jonathan's voice now is a kind of undoing of my sadness from our last meeting, when I walked away in grief knowing that I would never hear his voice again. Yet, as months have passed, his voice has remained, resurfacing as a guiding playback in my intellectual life. It sometimes rings in my mind as instantaneous advice, and other times finds expression through my speech in the moment. I see Jonathan's lively spirit and uncanny voice guide me in ways I had never imagined, making my life in the university, and as a pedagogue, so much more meaningful. It seems paradoxical to link Jonathan's voice to his presence in spirit, given his own critique of Walter Ong's essentialist connections between the two, but it is more like a spectral trace of his overwhelming influence. Perhaps it is a spiritual version of what Jason Stanyek and Benjamin Piekut call 'deadness', where the voice of the dead can generate meaning - and not just labour and value - in uncanny ways. I have no other way to understand this experience than as another manifestation of Jonathan's magnanimity. Perhaps this reverence is shaped by my South Asian upbringing, where gurus are equated with gods, and as I record these reflections, a verse from Rabindranath Tagore's opening poem in *Gitanjali* comes to mind, "Thy infinite gifts come to me only on these very small hands of mine. Ages pass, and still thou pourest, and still there is room to fill." Jonathan's mentorship remains, and I cherish these unexpected encounters with his guiding voice. Mentorship holds deep personal significance for me because, in many parts of the world, it is sometimes the only way for women to step out of the heteropatriarchal confines of the family and other social institutions. In a previous note on Jonathan's mentorship, I recounted how he has influenced my scholarship, writing and love for the creative and the eclectic, but I never knew there was something beyond that that would be a guiding force in my journey as an intellectual. For me, Jonathan's abiding voice adds an otherworldly, mystical layer to the descriptions and experiences of vocal impairment in his writing, but instead of reading it as purely metaphysical, I understand it as an outcome of his ardent mentoring practice. Jonathan's deep voice and enduring spirit, as intertwined guiding forces, persist, and make him an undying source of intellectual curiosity and care.



Gabriel Gaston

TATTOO ADVICE

Alex Blue V

I met Jonathan in 2015 at a sound, media, and digital humanities conference in Los Angeles. He was the keynote speaker; I was a 2nd year PhD student who'd read a lot of his work and in doing so had been fully convinced that this whole sound thing was worth studying. He sat in the front row during my presentation, listening actively and intently as I presented some of my new research on race and noise-canceling headphones. I worked up the courage to approach him when the session had ended - after all, he was the famous academic, the keynote speaker, and I was (in my mind) no one, and I'd heard the adage about meeting your heroes. To the surprise of no one who knew him, he was gracious, humble (maybe even a bit embarrassed by my approach), and wanted to talk about my ideas. We went for a short walk and I got a free advising session.

A lot of things happened between my first time meeting him and Fall of 2022, when I joined the Communication Studies faculty at McGill. Stories for another day. Upon my arrival at McGill, Jonathan quickly volunteered to be my faculty mentor (volunteered to the department chair. He offered me no choice in the matter). In the couple of years I got to work closely with him, he offered a seemingly endless trove of advice, feedback, perspective. I learned a lot from that man, and I continue to learn from him now.

In July of 2024, I was thrilled to receive this text message [abridged]:

> *Hey Alex! Now I've got a non-work question for you (probably for more of a conversation if you're in town in August): my radiation treatment in May "broke the seal" for tattoos and now I'm thinking about getting one for real (which I know may lead to more). But I'm totally clueless...Happy to have any wisdom you have on the subject, and no rush.*

Finally, the student becomes the teacher! An opportunity for me to mentor Jonathan?

So, in case any of you are thinking about getting tattooed, or about other stuff, I'll share the most important bits of that advice here:

-They all hurt (to at least some degree). The sooner you accept this fact, and even lean into it, the better your experience will be. That said, some hurt worse than others. Maybe don't start with your knee for your first tattoo.

-Research artists until you find one that you like/feel aligned with. Any tattoo artist can give you a tattoo, but will it be work that lasts and work that you and the artist are proud of? ***Are they proud of and posting pictures of their work on bodies that look like yours?***

-Meaning is what you make of it: the idea that tattoos "should have meaning," while helpful for some, is really just an axiom that's been accepted because of purity culture/body shaming/etc. It's the idea that "permanently" altering your appearance lowers your value, so you should only get meaningful symbols. I understand this impulse, and used to subscribe to this belief. At a certain point, you realize that the important thing is *you* liking it. As you change, your relationship to some of your tattoos may change, but they are all representations of various phases in your life. Get shit that you like. Don't be surprised if it doesn't mean the same thing to you in 20 years.

-On that note, if you arrive with a fully-fleshed out idea that you crafted independently from the tattoo artist you're working with, expect that your idea might change. If you're inflexible, you're more likely to end up with a bad tattoo.

-**ASK THE ARTIST.** Questions about which body parts are best for tattooing, how they'll look as you age or as your weight changes, these are all things an experienced tattoo artist has spent a lot of time studying.

I'm sure Jonathan would've gotten a cat tattoo. A cattoo?



Tattoo Aftercare instructions taken from Tattoo Zoo, "Your fav little trans/ queer owned tattoo shop in downtown Victoria, BC!"

ACTUALLY, IT WOULD BE FUN

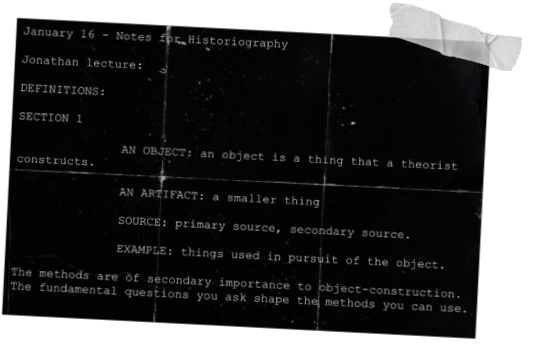
Dylan Mulvin

Jonathan writes:

"Basically, I would like to write like a midcentury American pragmatist who also has a sense of humour, and who has sometimes enjoyed hallucinogens."

Among Jonathan's many voices the one in writing is always so funny. Books, essays, emails, cancer scrolls, each arcing towards a punchline. Favourite manoeuvres: a logical step taken too far, an irony treated too literally, the interior of the body turned inside out. Let us reclaim hallucinogens for Jonathan's midcentury pragmatist; that is the pragmatist who makes sure to mention squirrels in every book so that they are indexed. (AP: 11–12; Mp3: 65, 219, 264; DF: 184, 204). Another manoeuvre: use the paratexts of the genre to cache your joke - like the index, or in some cases, the footnote.

Before the writing is the idea and how to get there. My notes from his graduate seminar on historiography (COMS 637, Winter 2013): he begins before anything else, with definitions. These simple declarations distilling all research into its component parts.



Some objects Jonathan constructed: the audiovisual litany; the ideology of vocal ability; audile scarification; perceptual technics; transduction; machine listening; the poetics of signal processing; impairment theory; format theory (tongue in cheek); a general theory of compression; dismediation.

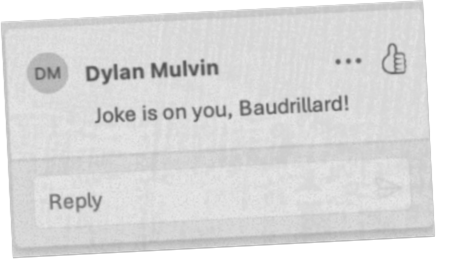
Some artifacts he used: The Mall of America; mediate auscultation; The Dorko-Phone; spoons; W; signal processing; Suzanne Vega's Tom's Diner; Mead Killion's Flanged Tip Earplug; the cat telephone.



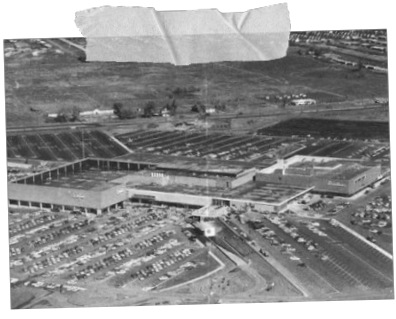
An example: Napster Cat

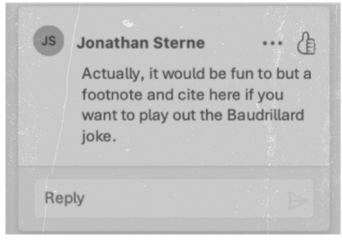


Some sources: The Muzak Research Review; the minutes of the NTSC; the Folger Shakespeare Library; Archives of Ophthalmology and Otology; an interview with JJ Johnston; Records of the Psycho-acoustic Laboratory; Patent No. U.S.2012/0063616; his physician's notes.



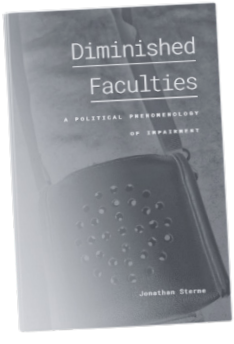
A memory - Jonathan's corporate apartment in Cambridge. His furious, some might say ballistic typing. I'm stuck on an introductory sentence, he's flying ahead. I am searching for citations for "infrastructure," and he is changing the title of the document to "Selecting for Green(and Kittens).





Writing with Jonathan is collaborative.

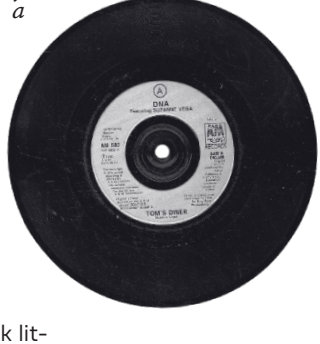
As much as he is a virtuoso he is an invitation to refract and multiply your ideas together. But there is always a spectacle. Writing with Jonathan is like watching videos of Ricky Jay doing sleight of hand magic.





Awestruck, watching as full, crystalline thoughts are conjured in front of you and flipped into a hat thirty feet away.



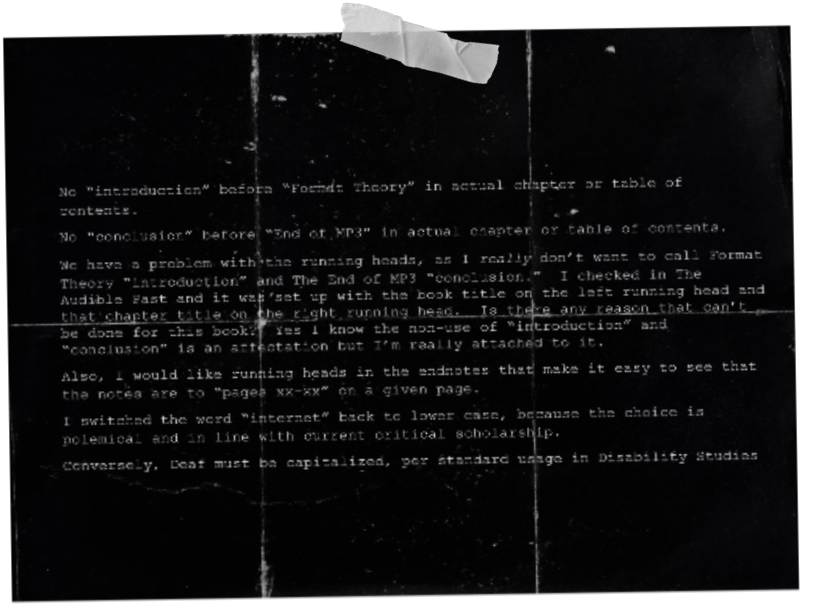


You could be his fresh eyes. He writes about shamelessly sharing his rough drafts with others who had never seen the work before. An embrace of the collective production of knowledge and a gesture to demystify the magic of his scholarship: promising, if you watch close enough, that you can learn the trick. You could still catch things for him.

The thunder of his writing would sometimes mask little errors. His citations are a mess, spelling is all over the place. He never uses Oxford commas, he doesn't care. He isn't not particular - he had his notions. He removes the collective "we" since it's a conceit that tries and fails to assert uniformity with the reader. Since he died, I wince when I put it in my writing.



In the shared file for the copyedits of MP3 he asserts to the press:



No "introduction" before "Format Theory" in actual chapter or table of contents.

No "conclusion" before "End of MP3" in actual chapter or table of contents.

We have a problem with the running heads, as I really don't want to call Format Theory "Introduction" and The End of MP3 "conclusion." I checked in The Audible Past and it was set up with the book title on the left running head and that chapter title on the right running head. Is there any reason that can't be done for this book? Yes I know the non-use of "introduction" and "conclusion" is an attestation but I'm really attached to it.

Also, I would like running heads in the endnotes that make it easy to see that the notes are to "pages xx-xx" on a given page.

I switched the word "internet" back to lower case, because the choice is polemical and in line with current critical scholarship.

Conversely, Deaf must be capitalized, per standard usage in Disability Studies

Back in seminar, he asks, in a rare invocation of the second person:

"What is it that you are doing when you're looking at stuff?"

The answer:

> *"Relational analysis: you are often looking at the texture and the relationships of things to other things, instead of looking at properties that appear to inhere in objects. In fact, even those boundaries and properties that appear to inhere are often, if not always, the result of the relationship of the object to other objects."*

Jonathan's writing is a continuation of his research, always and forever relational and like his lectures, casually ingenious. Finally, this is what unites the written personas of the midcentury pragmatist, the comedian, and the magician.

> *Jonathan invites us, his audience, his students, his cowriters, to freshly behold the odd ready-mades of the world.*

WHAT CAN JONATHAN STERNE'S IDEAS ABOUT TECHNOLOGY AS A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PRACTICE OFFER REFUGEE STUDIES?

Roda Siad

While the influential work of media and communications scholar Jonathan Sterne and refugee studies may not be among the first associations that come to mind, I would like to share a few thoughts on how my late doctoral supervisor has inspired the approach I take to my PhD research. My dissertation is an ethnographic study of how emerging technologies and data mediate the everyday lives of refugees in camps and settlements in Kenya and Uganda. My conversations with Jonathan in meetings and through his work have shifted the way I view the technologies (e.g., biometric technology, blockchain and databases) I encountered in the field.

In current scholarship on technology in migration and humanitarian contexts, there is a tendency to view these tools as "novel" and emphasize their technical and infrastructural dimensions. Jonathan's understanding of technologies as "crystallized sets of repeatable activities and relationships" (Sterne, 2006, p. 94) provided a perspective that helped me move beyond the assumptions often attached to claims of novelty. It encouraged me to think more critically about the longer social, cultural and political histories in which these technologies operate. In my work, this understanding brought the focus back to the social—the assumptions, values and practices that influence and are influenced by these systems. As Jonathan put it, "the most basic questions of technology are always social questions" (2003, p. 383).

The more time I spent in the field, the less I saw these technologies as novel and more as extensions of the everyday social practices of state and non-state humanitarian actors that operationalize them. Jonathan's assertion that technologies cannot be studied independently because they do not exist outside of social practices has helped me theorize and contribute new insights to the critical study of technology in refugee contexts. Framing technologies as cultural artifacts that shape and are shaped by the political and *social struggles* taking place within humanitarian aid has deepened my own understanding of the emerging challenges in this space.

[Sterne 2003; Sterne 2006]

JONATHANISMS

Burç Köstem

I have a few Jonathanisms that I've started collecting and thought to share them with all of you. Now that it's looking like I might get to stay in academia for a bit longer (if that's still a thing in 10 years) I thought I'd collect some of Jonathan's advice. Sometimes they're about writing. Sometimes about academic life. Sometimes about life in general.

I originally wrote this in the immediate aftermath of seeing him in hospice care. Even though Jonathan himself is no longer with us, I've heard from some of his other students and colleagues who've suggested more Jonathanisms.

So I've updated the list with those submissions too.

"Write before you're ready"

This comment resonates with me for several reasons.

First, it's easy to idealize the writing process as an academic. The predictable image of writing in many of our heads is one of a desk covered in books and papers and notes and coffee and cats. And yes, Jonathan's desk at home looks exactly like this with the addition of multiple instruments including synth decks, bass guitars and, at least when his students visited for house parties, a theremin set up beside his desk.

But part of this aphorism for me has worked to help loosen this supposed ideal of what writing ought to look like. Sometimes writing happens in a hospital bed. Sometimes writing takes place in prison. Sometimes we write with urgency in the immediate shadow of political action. And sometimes writing happens in a shitty café next to the Jean Talon metro, trying to think of a haiku response to Jonathan.

I think writing compulsively, in the way Jonathan himself seems to do, writing before you're ready, before you have everything figured out, before you can get to your desk and check your notes–helps break not only this academic ideal but the voice and tone this kind of writing helps perpetuate. Writing beyond the book adorned desk makes you a better writer. It stops your desk from becoming a fortress that closes itself to the outside world. It breaks away the deductive impulse to plan everything out in advance. It makes room for accident and happenstance.

In an environment where academic writing is under attack from all kinds of financial and political pressures, it's good advice. Write before you are ready. You can always go back to the desk to fact check everything, edit as you please, when that opportunity arises. And if you're lucky, you'll also have brilliant mentors and friends like Jonathan to help edit your drafts.

"Leave things out"

I guess this is the inverse of Jonathan's prolificness. As I noted above, Jonathan could and did write about a lot of things. Off the top of my head, I can remember as wide-ranging topics as a missile-mail system; the dork-o-phone; the phonograph; obsolescence; disability justice; art; philosophy; fatigue; cassette tapes; Shakespeare; cybernetics and of course the mp3.

Amidst all this writing, he always advised me to also leave things out. Don't give writing everything you've got. Choose what not to write about.

"You are the theorist"

Jonathan always encouraged me to be bolder in my theorizing. We have had our disagreements that's for sure. But he always encouraged his students to understand and synthesize their own circumstances and their research materials on their own terms.

It's true that Jonathan has little time for expositions on other people's work whether that's some venerable long dead philosopher or your favorite in vogue academic. Not only that, through my 10 years of knowing him Jonathan has always discouraged his students from writing expositions of his own work. Citing his work in your manuscript often resulted in the comment "Thank you, but I don't need the credit. Here's someone else you could cite whose work says something similar".

But the comment "you are the theorist" was equal parts empowering and daunting to hear from him. It was in part him telling me to not lean on others as heavily in my writing, which every grad student needs to hear. But it also meant that he took his student's work seriously.

"Always make room for the cheap joke"

Jonathan lived by this advice, wherever possible. I think it is beautiful that some of his most relevant and interesting writing is also the funniest and weirdest. Two words - cat telephone.

"No discipline should be judged by its worst examples"

It's easy these days to find examples of bad or pointless or inane academic writing posturing as radical and revolutionary. There is so much of it! And as the repressive actions against academia continue to exceed our collective political will and capacity to fight them, I suspect such bad academic writing will continue to be published.

It's easy enough to roll one's eyes at such writing. I know I did. But here's what Jonathan told me: "No discipline deserves to be judged by its worst examples."

OK, this seems obvious in retrospect but grad school me is thankful I've learned this lesson. Read generously, read expansively, and read beyond the latest trends.

"Seek and destroy"

This is again, the countertendency to the one above. When you did have a bone to pick with something for a legitimate reason, Jonathan also made room for that. It has been a feature of his grad syllabi that as a student you get one (1) week of what he calls "seek and destroy" where you can really go after an author and take down their arguments. You can use your "seek and destroy" pass any time you want. But you only get the one. I guess one should savor a take-down if and when appropriate.

"But...show me the last time Marxism was a dominant tendency in US academia"

This was something that I really related to. So much of humanities theorizing that I read in the 2010s pitched itself as "moving beyond traditional models of ideology critique" or somehow going beyond a supposed once dominant Marxist orthodoxy.

As Jonathan often liked to point out Marxism hasn't been dominant in the humanities for decades now. It's possible that things are beginning to change and there's a much more receptive audience today than 5 years ago. But still, Marxism and communism are nowhere near being hegemonic intellectual and political projects in the US academy.

So, it's misleading when professors and authors pretend to be working against some imagined Marxist orthodoxy.

"Use Unorthodox methods"

Jonathan often took delight in how the humanities misappropriated other disciplines methods in nonetheless rigorous and reflective ways. There's something genuinely enjoyable about immanent critique of another discipline's methods, whether it's a critique of political economy or psychoanalysis, linguistics, cybernetics etc. It can be kind of trolly, to be sure. But it's so interesting and mind-bending when done right.

"Be more heuristic in your writing"

He never said this explicitly, at least to me, but I think Jonathan often thinks of writing as flowing into his teaching and vice versa. So much of his writing feels like him saying "OK, so here's how this phenomenon actually works" in his no BS, let's cut to the basics voice. Sure, his writing can be theoretical and profound, when necessary, but I really think he wants people to understand the world so that they can love it, fight for it, survive it with justice and dignity. He always said to be more "heuristic" in my writing. And I think that's what he meant.

"You can't eat prestige" (thanks to Hannah for reminding me!)

I often hear people talk about having prestigious fellowships, prestigious grants, or being published in a prestigious journal. I never know what others mean when they say prestige. When I talked with Jonathan about this, he confirmed that academia in North America is obsessed with prestige and added "You can't eat prestige."

To me prestige sounds like a euphemistic way to talk about competitiveness which through some weird set of associations is equated to quality. This is a prestigious fellowship, we've selected you out of so many people, all your work is great. Yet these associations sound very misleading. Everything I know about academia in practice contradicts them. Think about what competition, for example, often leads to – academic trends, toxic work environments, cliques. Competition, amongst academic workers, leads to precarity, it leads to resentment, it leads to anxiety. In an increasingly tough job market organized around brutal competition and an academia facing decades long austerity, precarity is the most immediate primary result of prestige.

I couldn't truly appreciate what Jonathan meant by "you can't eat prestige" when I was just a grad student. It was hard to make sense of, in part because Jonathan applied to and won several prestigious grants and fellowships. The semester he passed, he was on a sabbatical as a Guggenheim fellow. But for all that, Jonathan cared deeply about the politics of academic labor. He knew that the supposed prestige of our institutions is a poor substitute for improving the material conditions of our collective labor. I'd rather have the people doing the majority of teaching, grad students and adjunct faculty, get decent health care, rather than worry about prestige. I think that's what Jonathan meant too.

"There is no such thing as an equipment"

This is an addition from Darin during an email exchange - apparently Jonathan would tell Darin its "the one thing and only thing he ever took form Heidegger". It warms my heart to imagine their conversation and friendship.

While editing this, Sadie asked me if the grammatical oddity was on purpose "an equipment". I hadn't caught it before but it makes sense. Jonathan lived with a lot of gear-some of which even adorned the cover of his books. I can't imagine Jonathan waxing lyrically about jugs and tables and such. But my memory of him is inseparable from him tinkering with the entire world of gear that surrounds his and Carrie's house. Bass guitars, the modular synth next to his writing desk, the odd pedalboard that would sit beside books on phenomenology.

"It's an electromagnetic field that only works by being disrupted, you have to mess with it" I remember him saying about the theremin he had set up during a house party.

This is one of the ways I will remember him. Tinkering, playing, getting others to mess with stuff.

"There is no stress test for being human. Existence may require effort, but effort cannot — should not — be defined externally and applied to the existing subject"

This is an excerpt from Jonathan's latest book,[1] from the chapter on fatigue. Having read this chapter a couple of times now, I find this statement quite striking. For me this sentiment represents an important and rather uncharacteristic humanism in Jonathan's work, one that as he himself acknowledges is both simple and profound. At the risk of misreading him a little bit, I can't help but read this as a profoundly anti-work statement filtered through disability studies – that one's life need not be mediated to one's relation to work. Productive, reproductive or otherwise.

But there's so much more in this passage than that. Just before Jonathan writes "Fatigue is precisely not a demand, but if it were to be read as a demand, it is a demand that continuing to exist has to be enough." Being with him yesterday, hearing him joke and reminisce and smile, I truly felt these words come to life.

We love you, Jonathan.

1. Jonathan, I'm sorry in advance for this brief exposition on your work. I hope you don't mind.

ON "THE INTERNET NEVER SLEEPS": FOR JONATHAN

Sumanth Gopinath

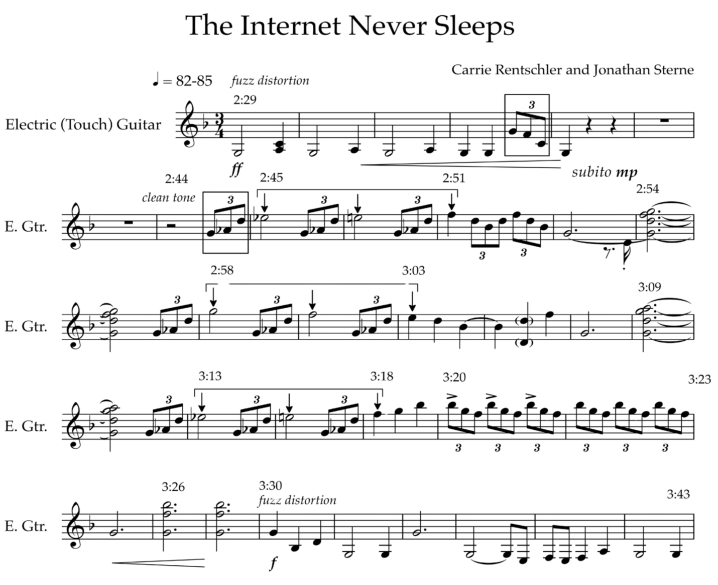
Among Jonathan Sterne's many underappreciated qualities was his musicality—not only as a scholar, but also as a practitioner. He was a remarkable instrumentalist and songwriter/composer and performed in many bands throughout his life (including, in his final decade, Hard Red Spring and Volte). He also produced electronica and electroacoustic recordings, including an ambient album *Music for Insomnia (2023)* under the name Buddha Curtain.[1] Although I am not comprehensively familiar with all of Jonathan's music, the recording I am most fond of thus far is *The Quiet Spaces (2023)*, a full-length album by Ex-Minnesotan, his post-rock/metal duo with his wife Carrie Rentschler. In it, Carrie plays drums and sings, and Jonathan plays an electric touch guitar, which was more feasible for him to play than a standard electric or bass guitar once cancer medications caused his fingers to become painfully sensitive.[2] (He wore thin gloves that protected his fingers but allowed him to play musical instruments.) Carrie and Jonathan co-wrote the songs on *The Quiet Spaces*. What follows is a brief, music-theoretically-informed appreciation of the lead track of the album, "The Internet Never Sleeps"; my intent is to use my scholarly training to illustrate and celebrate aspects of Jonathan's musical thinking.

The lyrics[3] efficiently describe a dystopian near future in which the electricity usage of the Internet has expanded and climatic temperatures have risen to such a degree that the lights must be turned off to keep the computer systems going. The narrator of these texts describes the situation with matter-of-fact statements, inhabiting the voice of an authority or technical expert and then issues two commands (in the song's chorus): "Turn out the lights / Power the servers." The critical take on the Internet and contemporary technologies more broadly will be of no surprise to readers of Jonathan's scholarship, which includes early research on the Internet and in recent years focused on sound, music, and artificial intelligence (including an unfinished book project on the topic). And, it is widely known that both the Internet currently uses vast amounts of electrical power and AI promises to require much, much more of it, all contributing to the ongoing ecological crisis euphemistically described as "climate change." As Jonathan wrote around the time of the album's completion, "We are trying to write midlife-appropriate metal songs, which is a topical challenge." These lyrics, in my view, do achieve this goal in compelling ways, not only in the doom-laden scenario they portray, but also in the use of the word "servers," which both indexes the client-server architecture of computer networks and hints at the power relations (expressed in feudal terms) often appearing in metal lyrics, as in lords and servants, masters and slaves, etc. Of course, a command to "power the servers" is literally shunting electricity to the hierarchically dominant node in this architecture, but also suggests its opposite: to give power to those who serve.[4]

I want to close with two additional observations about the song, based on my analysis of its form. "The Internet Never Sleeps" is 5:46 in length. It is set in G Dorian minor (mostly) in 3/4 meter at about 82–85 beats per minute (BPMs), and it includes lengthy instrumental passages in addition to verse and chorus sections. First, the song stages a structural conflict between loud metal music and quiet ambient music, two genres that Jonathan loved and worked in, creatively. The song begins with a simple arpeggio or broken-chord figure in the touch guitar, but underneath it one hears a sustained background chord (on a synthesizer or another touch guitar layer) that seems to build up over the song's first fifty seconds. (The chord sounds like Gm9 or Dm/G)

Aside from the opening, this sustained chord becomes most apparent when the loud, fuzz-distorted touch guitar and/or drums drop out, as at 2:38 (chord + drums) or 5:15 (just chord).

The end of each chorus entails a clever bit of tone-painting: the dropping out of instruments, leaving the background chord (and perhaps drums) to continue on, mimics the effect of cutting off the power, aside from the trickle that keeps the Internet going. (Contrarily, when the metal music returns, the power comes back on.) There is a degree of literalism here: Jonathan's touch guitar (like several of his other instruments: electric bass, synths) requires electricity to be heard. One can imagine a world in which electricity were rationed in order to maintain the Internet (especially its increasingly AI-driven aspects), including the electricity used by performing musicians. In addition, the ambient chord itself makes me think of the Windows 95 startup sound written by Brian Eno—specifically, the Fm9 chord that emerges towards the end. It's amusing to think of a 1990s-era computer sound as standing in, symbolically, for "the Internet"—the thought of which might have made Jonathan laugh.



Second, Jonathan's solo in the middle of the song is constructed very carefully. My musical transcription of his guitar part at 2:29–3:43 was undertaken while mourning his loss—as a way of spending time with him. Despite the transcription's personal value to me, however, it is not necessary to be able to read it. You can instead follow the timestamps included below. The solo proper is at 2:45–3:30. Using a clean guitar tone lacking distortion, the solo picks up the triplet figure in his guitar part from the end of the chorus and inverts it (so it goes up instead of down). Also, he flattens the A, giving the music a G Phrygian inflection (but sometimes with a raised 6th scale-degree, or E♮).[5] The result is a consistent G-A♭-D triplet on beat 3 leading to a variable longer note, and after three occurrences of this pattern, the music then leads to more melodic material ending with a sustained chord. In the first iteration of this pattern, it's E♭-E-F (2:45–2:51), so an ascending chromatic line, which makes me think of mystery/spy music for some reason—it's somewhat James Bond theme-esque. In the next phrase, the longer notes descend: G-F-E (2:58–3:03). In the third phrase, the E♭-E-F returns (3:13–3:18), but the music ascends up to its highest point (B♭ above), climaxing with a repeated high triplet B♭-G-F figure (3:20–3:23). Intriguingly, the sustained chords at ends of each phrase (2:54, 3:09, 3:26) expand in range, from G4–G5, to G4–A5, and then G4–B♭5, encapsulating the wider total ambit of each successive phrase.

There is something very "classical" about this material: it is motivically tight and unfolds and develops gradually, like a Beethoven sonata or an elegant jazz solo. It also does a great job of setting up the return of the loud metal instrumental music and guitar distortion (at 3:30) that precedes the second verse. Aside from its structural role as a long, energy-contrasting and -building interlude, the entire guitar solo section makes me think of the people working to repair the power (figured by the distortion-free guitar and the musical "work" it undertakes), so that electricity can be restored beyond just maintaining the Internet.

Many of us were fortunate to hear Jonathan think aloud, in conversation, in classes, and in academic presentations, and this solo and song allow us to hear him think "aloud" as a musician. In recordings like "The Internet Never Sleeps," we can continue to appreciate yet another dimension of his beautiful mind, which we miss dearly.

1. Many of Jonathan's recordings are released under "New Mars Records," at Bandcamp: https://newmars.bandcamp.com/.
2. See Jonathan's blog, Super Bon!, February 3, 2023, https://superbon.net/2023/02/03/3-feb-2023/. "Hard Red Spring is the only band where I still play bass. Hand pain from my cancer meds has led me to switch from bass to touch guitar as my main instrument. Touch guitar is just less painful (I still wear gloves to play most days); I've also spent a lot of time with synthesizers. At Tuesday's HRS practice, for the first time ever, even with gloves, it was too painful for me to play finger style. So I played everything with a pick and it was better. This leaves me with a decision: do I try to learn all our music with a pick, or do I try and convert all of my basslines to things I can play on the touch guitar? The pick is the technically easy choice since I can already almost do it, but there is still some pain. The touch guitar choice is less painful but more technically difficult because what's easy on bass (especially that post-punk thing of repeating 8ths) is hard on touch guitar and what's hard on bass is easy on touch guitar. Over the pandemic I relearned the Volte repertoire on touch guitar but this is a different kind of playing."
3. See here: https://ex-minnesotan.bandcamp.com/track/the-internet-never-sleeps.
4. Carrie Rentschler's comments on the song are powerful and compelling; for her, the song depicts a resistance movement. "I always thought it was about folks who were taking over the controls of their own systems, trying to manage failing servers as members of a resistance movement/post-apocalyptic collectives, where the command to turn off the lights and power the servers was an attempt to use systems to provide care and access in conditions where the grid and its security were deeply compromised, and no company or government could be counted on. Very Margaret Atwood-esque."
5. The notes of G Phrygian mode are G-A♭-B♭-C-D-E♭-F-G.

JONATHAN STERNE, TEACHER

Fred Turner

Jonathan was always teaching me something, mostly by example.

I think the first time I met him – though I could be making this up; my memory is getting ever-more plastic as I age – we were both attending the first Association of Internet Researchers conference, in Lawrence, Kansas. A then-famous scholar was giving a keynote about virtual communities and all the amazing new networks the Internet was spawning. When he was done, a flock of students and young professors fluttered around his podium. The center of the room was clearly The Place to Be – in that place right then, and in the field writ large.

The lecture hall was otherwise empty, except for three somewhat pained looking graduate students standing at the edges and toward the back: Mark Andrejevic, me, and Jonathan. I think all three of us were probably thinking some version of what I was thinking at the time, which was: If this guy's take on virtual communities is the future of internet research, I'm not sure I want to be in this field. And I'm never going to get a job as an internet researcher. I was just interested in weirder stuff. And so was Jonathan. We chatted a bit, felt each other out with a little care, until we finally acknowledged that neither of us wanted to do the kind of work we'd just seen.

We didn't talk much more then, but eventually, Jonathan sent me a piece of writing in which he talked about two scientists wiring a live cat into an early telephone. This was media history the way it should be done – smart, funny, and completely illuminating. That bit soon became a piece of *The Audible Past*, still one of the two or three best media histories I've ever read. The book, like Jonathan, was so rich, so full of ideas, so unrestrained. I loved it. And it's been a model for my writing ever since.

When I got to Stanford, Jonathan set another example. My first year at Stanford was a little rough. This was twenty years ago and a faint whiff of status anxiety hung in the air. My first week on the job, one of my colleagues said to me, "Well, we're a good school, but we're not Harvard." Like I said, that was twenty years ago. Anyhow, I got my teaching evaluations at the end of my first quarter and they were very high. I was quite pleased with myself, thank you very much, but my assigned junior-faculty-mentor took me aside in the hall and said, "Fred, we're a little worried about you." "You are? Why?" "Well, your teaching evaluations were a little high. Are you getting your work done?"

My work? My mentor was trying to teach me that at Stanford, only research mattered. This wasn't completely true even then, but it remains truer than it should be. For Jonathan and thanks in part to his example, for me, teaching has always been a core part of the job of professoring. Jonathan disabused me early of the fantasy that our research is our primary contribution. Professors are wonderfully lucky: sure, we rummage through archives and read and write, but we also coach students into becoming scholars themselves. To share our curiosities, to cultivate the habit of being curious, and to let ourselves giggle while we do it – that was something Jonathan taught me how to do. I could tell all kinds of Jonathan stories and maybe some other time I will. Right now, I just want to say that he was the most generous teacher, warmest friend, and kindest role model I could have had.

CARTOON LAND (MEMORY/161 TO WILDERTON REMIX) - FOR JONATHAN STERNE



This song was built around some material which I recorded this year at my recording studio and on my cellphone, and then re-amplified and re-recorded at Hotel 2 Tango using microphones placed fairly far from the amp to capture the beautiful room sound there and a sense of distance from the source. The violin you hear was performed by my friend Jessica Moss. The lyrics are two poems I wrote following Jonathan's death and my mother's diagnosis with brain cancer, which occurred around the same time and have resonated together in this last year which has carried so much grief. They deal with themes of illness, resignation, ephemerality, and loss; and here appear interleaved with one another.

Ky Brooks

I MADE JONATHAN A MIX

Jeremy Morris

New to Canada,
I made Jonathan a mix—
Welcome on a disc.

He liked heavy sounds,
But I gave him Montreal's
"Indie" songs instead.

Was this mix for him?
Or me telling him what songs
I thought he should like?

Patient advisor,
Would hear any idea
I had, good or bad

I made Jon a mix—
I don't think he liked it much
Still listened with grace.



CATDAWG (AND STUFF)

CATDAWG Working Group Facilitators

And Stuff...

I don't think there was ever an explicit demand or request to name the working group. Jonathan had simply tasked one of his advisees with gathering a working group of students to talk about their research, and his. If there had been a request for a name, we might have spent more time on it, been more clever with it. Instead, there was an email and a subject line that needed filling. "Sound and Stuff" seemed as good a subject line, and as good a name, as any. Narrowly broad and vaguely specific.

You'd be forgiven for thinking the "and stuff" was a throwaway. Second fiddle to the main event: sound. But the "stuff" was the heart of what the group was about. Logistically, it was a reading group for grad students, post-docs, and visitors connected to Jonathan. More meaningfully, it was a place to share writing, talk through ideas, catch up, check-in, worry, question, laugh, eat and decompress. Because it was Jonathan, it was about sound. But because it was Jonathan it was also about anything and everything that was interesting.

> *"Projecting the Subject: Late-18th Century Visual Culture and the Problems of Modern Subjectivity"*
>
> *"Records of Montreal Musical History and eBay"*
>
> *"TYPEFIGHTER WRITER / TYPEWRITER FIGHTER (BURNERS & APORIAS)"*
>
> *"The 'Now' for the First and Last Time": The Convergence of Cybernetics, Early Computer Music, and Countercultural Critique in the Work of Herbert Brün"*

These titles come from in-progress works shared by Sound and Stuff members in 2007. They sit dormant in a folder on an old hard drive - /home/user/McGill/AHCS/SoundandStuff - alphabetically nestled between two folders of graduate courses taught by Jonathan (Repetition Repetition and Sound Studies). They are reminders of the projects old friends and colleagues were working on, but they also speak to the group's curiosity and variety. "Sound" might have been a topic that supposedly united us; "and stuff" gave us permission to play, wander and digress:

> *"As I mentioned to Jonathan in another email, I also have a paper to share, though it's more on Stuff than on Sound. It's about patents and technology. Anyway, it's a paper that I'm planning on submitting to a journal some time soon, but it is missing something, and I'd be appreciative of any feedback I could get on it." (email from Jeremy Morris to Dylan Mulvin, Jan. 23, 2012)*

What's in a Name?

As Sound and Stuff went from email subject line to actually recurring meetings, we shared our writing, delivered drafts of conference papers, discussed early portions of Jonathan's books, and tested pieces of our dissertations, grant applications or random scribblings whose futures were not yet certain. As facilitators tasked with convening the group, the email exchanges we have from the group's earliest iterations remind us of the group's core organizational principles: informality, curiosity and community.

"A quick welcome to our two newest members, Damien and Dylan. Welcome. (How's that for quick?)"

"We won't ask anyone to submit any work for this meeting, like we usually do, but we'll ask you to come ready to discuss some of your writing strategies (how do you start a "dissertation" anyway? how do you avoid/indulge in distraction? what helps/hinders your writing productivity? etc.)"

"This group has been essential in the development of my thesis, so it would be great to see some of you [at my dissertation defense] to bring things full circle." (from Randolph)

The total number of meetings per year varied based on everyone's hectic and randomly aligning schedules. It has also waxed and waned and dabbled with dormancy:

"It is clear to me that we (this includes me) would benefit from reconstituting the "old" working group for what may be one last time (in its original form, anyway) this winter term." (from Jonathan)

As such, the group has had several reboots over the years, along with new names to match a renewed focus (or its glorious lack thereof). There was some uncertainty in the transition from Sound and Stuff to something new; something less sound and more stuff that could speak to the ever-growing circle of people who had gravitated to Montreal to be around Jonathan. The name has always united the group and celebrated its disunity. It also served a logistical purpose, thanks to a confrontation with the booking system at Thomson House, the location on McGill's campus where our meetings were held. Apparently, we weren't allowed to book without an identity:

"I would need to know if you are a grad/phd/law or med student (essentially if you're a member of PGSS) and for what group you would be making this booking. As well, I would need to know the end time for the booking, keeping in mind that if this is for a boardroom booking they are only free of charge for a booking of up to two hours." (Thomson House Manager email, 2012)

These were a few of the compulsory and enabling conditions of what eventually became CATDAWG (so-(re)named, in 2012) and the reason our meetings lasted precisely two hours before a retreat to the bar: a classificatory demand from a grad student bar manager who had a web form needing completion. What were we? Grad students, but also cats and dawgs, puppies and kittens, members of the The Culture and Technology Discussion and Working Group.

"Based at McGill University, The CATDAWG is a working group that includes current students, postdocs, and visitors across several disciplines and from multiple institutions, and former members are always welcome back. The group has no formal structure beyond some affiliation with Jonathan Sterne. Its mission is to provide intellectual sustenance and support to its active members, and its manifesto is, simply, "nachos." Dylan Mulvin came up with the name."

Being Together

For many young scholars, the official institutions of academia are alienating at best and actively harmful at worst. It is all too common that the institutions upon which grad students and early career scholars so precariously depend are the same ones that exploit them.

When the difference between being funded or not is whether someone is willing to take a chance on you, you learn to put up with a lot of bullshit.

McGill was no exception. The first year I showed up in Montreal, I learned from friends who had been researching sexual violence on campus that McGill had no internal policy regarding sexual misconduct. I learned that at the time, less than 1% of full time faculty were Black. I learned that McGill was incredibly difficult to navigate for people with disabilities.

Jonathan was keenly aware of these dynamics. He was, also, an incredibly generous, dependable, insightful person who fought for his students' and his community's wellbeing to the best of his ability in spite of all these obstacles. But more than that, he truly believed in the academic endeavor. He worked to the best of his ability to mobilize within and against the university's institutional structures, with whatever privileges that were afforded to him, always with an eye to make them more just.

Looking back, I can't help but think that CATDAWG itself came out of similar commitments. Given the limits of institutional arrangements, CATDAWG was helpful as an alternative model for organizing our intellectual labor, on our own terms, sometimes parallel to and sometimes independent of official academic channels. There were many such working groups, reading groups and labs in Montreal. What made CATDAWG special was how it was organized not around Jonathan's own personal charisma, or intellectual curiosity, (although those always shined through) but rather explicitly around the needs of its members. More than anything CATDAWG was a place to share and organize our collective intellectual labor.

This mode of organization required a communal practice of care. There are many reasons to feel alone in grad school and academia. A sprawling research project with a blurry, far-away deadline, solo research trips, imposter syndrome, moving, parenting, a pandemic, writing setbacks, more rejection than most of us have ever experienced, tight budgets, an amorphous schedule with little external accountability, the list goes on. CATDAWG made many of us feel less alone. During "Mental Health Resources" sessions in 2018 and 2020, for example, we spent over an hour of discussion mapping out resources available in Montreal and beyond for seeking health care. Members also shared periodical "check-ins" where we were encouraged to talk about progress since the last meeting and goals for future ones. But they also became a space to vent, share strategies around teaching, or report on new culinary finds or academic software. CATDAWG offered a structure for our weeks, a deadline to meet, and people to commiserate with along with invaluable feedback on work, ideas, and tactics for getting through grad school.

Such a mode of organization also required community building. Reading groups, nachos, potlucks. I know you are a CATDAWG, even if we've never crossed paths, if the words "black bean nachos" conjure more than mere tex mex, and transport you, instead, half-way up Mount Royal, to a stand-alone townhouse overlooking an old reservoir. The nachos were bad. *Are bad*. But they represented everything that the group was: regularity, rhythm, culture, ritual: a notch in the continuous line from campus, up the hill, and through Montreal, to the cheese dip at Jon and Carrie's. The continuity of chips. A conjuncture of snacks. Just as paper in progress brought us to the meeting, the nachos brought us into the bar, to our next meeting, a circle around our teetotalling leader whose credit card would cover drinks and snacks and whose dork-o-phone would buzz over the top of our sidechat.

Demystification

Many of us in academia are perfectionists, or we at least hold our work to high standards that can feel impossible to meet. CATDAWG taught me a lesson in humility: if you want to grow as a thinker and writer, you have to ask for help, you have to bring others in. And watching senior students and Jonathan model this in CATDAWG allowed junior scholars to do the same. The group's culture of workshopping in-progress and deeply imperfect work was built on trust, something that isn't automatic in highly competitive grad programs where students are pit against one another for limited attention, funding, and jobs.

In 2014, Jonathan came back from Microsoft Research and was determined to make the working group more like the Social Media Collective's weekly meetings. The structure of those meetings—weekly, in the morning, everyone jacked on free corporate caffeine and ready with their pithy updates—was intoxicating for a person who hummed with routine and the buzz of people talking about their ideas. We couldn't replicate this at McGill but we did write weekly updates to each other. I really struggled with this. How do you capture a week of grad school? The haze of reading, the mud of trying to write, the hyper feeling of transient inspiration. To wit:

> *"I am almost finished my guest lecture for next week. My goal for this coming week is to make major progress on my current dissertation chapter."*

But then the check-ins worked. The mixture of people willing to share everything on their minds and those of us hiding behind guest lectures became a solution, a buzz of busy work and breakthrough moments, an inbox salad of the mundane and the ecstatic. Led, of course, by Jonathan's own transparency and willingness to drop self-consciousness and tell us exactly what he was or wasn't doing:

> *"What this means practically is that I'm letting myself off the hook for any new writing other than a revised review of the Peters book. I'm sure I'll do a little here and there, but mostly it's going to be about teaching this term, and keeping everything else moving"*

The Art and Science of Generative Feedback

Like most reading and writing groups, we shared work in progress. The group provided accountability but also support and encouraged reading each other's work in generative ways. It was, in a sense, not too different from many other reading groups. But this was *our* reading group and *that* was the difference. For those of us who had a relatively narrow experience with their own project, pulling our heads out of the niche and into a completely different topic taught us how to ask constructive questions and provide generous feedback even on topics we weren't familiar with. Jonathan modeled curiosity. There was rarely a topic about which he couldn't find something to say, and the fact that he asked relevant and excited questions helped at least some of us overcome the imposter syndrome that many of us were feeling or had felt in other spaces.

CATDAWG was meant as a playground for the curious and an invitation for dropping pretensions. Not that every presentation or group discussion felt fluid or positive or supportive; arguments emerged and disagreements took place. But the group structure reminded us to do so in ways that were respectful and caring.

Distributed Agency

What does it mean to be a working group? What is the work of a working group? Not centred around a grant or deliverables, but to be truly cultural and social. Not a cult of personality but undeniably centred around a person, Jonathan was the leader, and his first acts were always setting the tone.

He never spoke first. Almost always spoke last.

CATDAWG was also practical. As Jonathan's career developed, he attracted increasing numbers of students, postdocs, and generalized fans, and his attention and feedback were in high demand. Many people wondered how did he manage it all? CATDAWG was one way. It was a way for Jonathan to connect to his students efficiently, touching base with those who didn't need anything immediately, talking to us en masse about professionalization topics that we all needed to hear about at some point, and using it as a way to read students' work in time he had already allocated for that purpose.

Jonathan's Theory of CATDAWG (and its earlier iteration, Sound and Stuff) to the extent there was a unifying theory revolved around the idea that he can't and shouldn't be everything to everyone.

I can't be the only one...

Now, this strategy is even more necessary, but so bittersweet.

Working groups populate headlines: Strategic task forces deployed to address problems of urgent social crisis, to deliberate on contentious debates. They draw in expertise, produce reports, or delay change through the slog of bureaucracy. A working group is a response without specificity. The problem is obvious in the name, blending the most generic gerund of activity and the simplest of names for a collectivity. In retrospect Jonathan probably would have liked the "Doing Stuff Collective."

Our working group was not that working group. Our doing stuff collective was a non-teleological aggregation of different weirdos at different career points; a cross-generational venn diagram for easing the aches of research and professionalization.

Maybe the work of the group was clearest when there was a refocused purpose. A CATDAWG message from Jonathan reminding those of us in the group who were his active students to complete our progress trackers:

> *"As a reminder, while the progress tracking form is a bit wonky it is real in that it does force us once a year to have a serious conversation about goals and deadlines, and it also carries some bureaucratic force with it, so as Foucault would say, we need to make sure our papers are in order."*

I have no evidence Foucault said this — but this is definitely something Jonathan would say Foucault said, and I would believe him.

Not every meeting felt good, and for some people, none of them did. The labour of CATDAWG was the peculiar, braided labour of making knowledge and making a collective: this was a solution and not an admixture. We could not separate the grind of being a scholar and the mess of being in a community of scholars.

It came out in the forming of friendships among similarly unsure and flailing grad students, but also in the alienating effects of confronting others seemingly on the other side: confident, secure, declarative, and assertive. One of Jonathan's gifts was his patience with everyone across this spectrum.

On Being on Email

When the pandemic hit, CATDAWG moved online. Amongst that first wave of uncertainty and —for many of us—aloneness, we met weekly on Zoom. While this was a totally diminished experience in terms of socializing and nachos and getting out of the apartment, it did have some benefits. I joined meetings from Vancouver months before I even started the PhD, and recent grads and alumni joined in from all around the world. We read books together, wrote collectively, compiled resources, started archiving. And online it stayed to accommodate our spread out geographies and compromised immunities. We socialized IRL.

We had our last meeting on the 31st of May 2024. We then all parted ways for the summer, with plans to start back up in the fall. Our first meeting of the 24/25 season was "postponed" due to Jonathan being in the hospital with what we thought might be pneumonia. While he suggested it, we didn't want to go on without him. The next month, he still wasn't well, and when we half-heartedly decided to meet, the result was me, alone in a Zoom room. Some members joined the Grierson Research Group—Darin Barney's analogue effort—in the meantime. Others focused on work and caught up informally.

For the next few months the CATDAWG email list went quiet, as we all waited and hoped. The occasional emails that went out were from Jonathan himself, using it as a way to provide updates to his many students en masse. CATDAWG emails were also the way many were made aware that Jonathan had entered hospice, and that he had died on the 20th of March, 2025. Since then, it's been back to quiet.

Some months on, the future of CATDAWG without Jonathan remains unclear. Members have ideas about dissolution, transformation, rebirth.

For now, what began with an email might also end with an email.

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