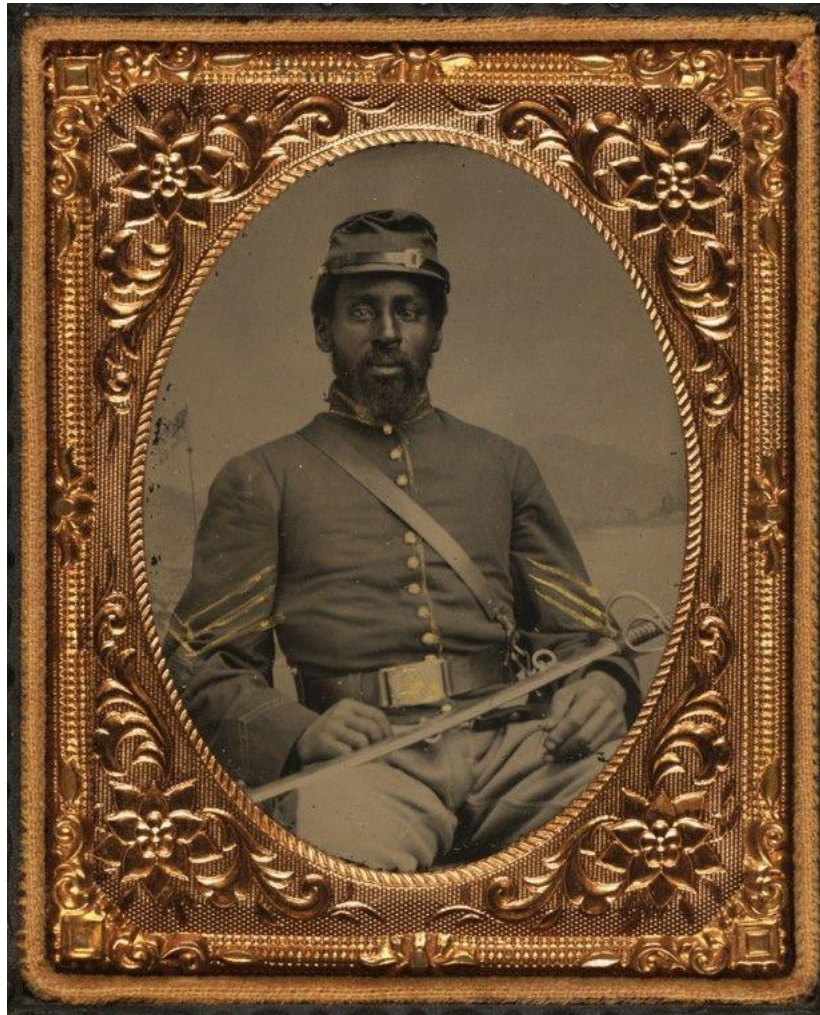


Silence and Whispers of Photography: A Wounded Solider

“To hear past the historical insignificance assigned to sounds, we need to hear more than their sonic or phonic content. We need to know where they might touch the ground, momentarily perhaps, even as they dissipate in air.”¹

“The *voices of the dead* is a striking figure of exteriority. Because it comes from within the body and extends out into the world, speech is traditionally considered as both interior and exterior, both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the limits of subjectivity.

In contrast, the voices of the dead no longer emanate from bodies that serve as containers for self-awareness. The recording is, therefore, a resonant tomb, offering the exteriority of the voice with none of its interior self-awareness.”²



A photograph is unequivocally silent. Or is it? In this project, I investigate the blank traces of silence. I focus specifically on stains of audibility inscribed in one photograph. What is absent sound? Why do we talk about the life of images—cinematic, still shots or single photographs—with so little attention to the sonar dimension? Is a phenomenological intervention possible within the theatre of sound studies and photographic silence? Most broadly, I am interested in the complicated

¹ Kahn, Douglas. 1999. *Noise, Water, Meat: a History of Sound in the Arts*. MIT Press. P. 4.

² Jonathan Sterne. 2003. *The Audible Past* pg. Duke University Press. P. 290

relationship between photography and sound—more precisely, the invisible yet palpable pathos of silence. While in the photographic medium sound is negated and absent, in this project I read the photograph as an aural origin point of sorts; that is, I aim to read the photograph as an aurally vulnerable wound—an original kind of howling residue, a ghostly *spot* replete with pulsating absent noises. In other words, this project is a sonically imaginative history wherein the phenomenology of absent sound—shape, properties, spatial registers and temporal outlines—is reconsidered.

My goal is to investigate various inaudible and ephemeral sounds preserved in the photograph—perhaps the photographic medium can be read as a different kind of ‘resonant tomb.’³ Jonathan Sterne aptly writes: ‘Sound is a little piece of the vibrating world.’⁴ I take seriously the potential temporal and spatial roles of nonexistent sounds in photography. Thus, I am not interested in the conventional and abrupt adjudication between sound and vision—regardless whether the image is static, in cinematic motion, or in photographic stillness. On the contrary: In my reading, the ethereal residue of the photograph is epistemologically unstable and acoustically complex. In the photograph, *sounded silence* is not reductive, or the simple dialectic other of *soundness*. The pejorative and simple binaries separating silence and sound need further complication: in this paper, the absence of photographic noise is thus neither a lacunae of *soundlessness*, nor merely a flattened—ordinary and mute—object of silenced voice. Instead, perhaps the photographic medium—a residual scar of quietude and persistent longing—has a unique ability to store the evaporated ghost noises of the past. In *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement*, Gaston Bachelard’s **evocatively** contemplates the shadow resonance of an auditory landscape. He writes about the imaginative capaciousness of ‘ear that knows how to dream.’⁵ For Bachelard, the poetic imagination of sound is infinitely expansive.’ It seems the evanescence of sound breathes most freely in the material imagination of Air. Is it possible that the intangible visual reverberations of a photograph can construct the shapes of absent sounds? What can the optical flatness of the photographic image tell us about auditory embodiment, and the shapes of sound?

I wanted to explore further both the thick blanket of photographic silence, as well as the photograph’s quixotic erasure of audible sounds. My goals: to carefully approximate alternative

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, 11.

⁵ Vivian Sobchack Bachelard, Gaston. 1988. *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement*. Dallas Institute Publications, Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture.

dimensionalities of silence in hopes of marking absent sound with imaginative visibility.⁶ I want to suggest we read the photographic palimpsest as an ideal place to explore the ‘intimate immensity’ of a silent sonar landscape; the uncanny life of a photograph is comprised of a silent atmosphere—pregnant, swelling and faceless—wherein we can ‘hear ourselves listen.’⁷ In this phenomenological mediation on absence, the photograph’s unequivocal emptiness of sound is an infinite spatial-temporal gap imbued with saturated quietude.⁸

Bruce Smith writes in *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England*, ‘we need a cultural poetics of listening.’⁹ In order to approximate the absent sounds of photography and the past, I sculpt an imagined history of textured sound—I accomplish this by constructing three different silent tiers of the photograph. These receptacles of silence are investigated within the *worldscape* of one mid-nineteenth century photograph. In this spirit I postulate three different *inaudible temporal textures* within the air of the photograph—each window of tonal silence is a kind of hollow glass box with transparent skin. While there is indeed a smudged haze that bleeds between these various sonorous tiers, these are rough demarcations I hope to outline throughout the paper. First, I read silence as a kind of damp Heideggerian vessel. Heidegger writes: ‘we become aware of the vessel’s holding nature when we fill a jug. The emptiness, the void, is what does the vessel’s holding.’¹⁰ The jug is a phenomenological container that holds absent sounds. In this project, silence centripetally gathers the absent auditory world; the spatial-temporal texture of this inscribed silence is a receding howl. Roland Barthes, Gaston Bachelard and others are the interlocutors of this first section. Next, I read silence as a horizontally attenuated shield or a thin and vaporous metallic wire. In this second sonorous gap, space and time freeze in mirror-like crystallization: there is a *cool* in the disquietude of the air. James Lastra formulations on *inscription* help undergird the conversation. Last, I read the third tier of silence as a resonant atmospheric echo. The soundlessness of this textured air is an oscillating acoustic shadow: a conjured silent scream drifts forward. This uncanny phantom voice

⁶ Toop, David. 2010. *Sinister Resonance: The Mediumship of the Listener*. Continuum International Publishing Group. I follow a claim Toop hopes to outline in his monograph, namely: ‘I hope to show that sound—and by sound I mean the entire continuum of the audible and inaudible spectrum, including silence, noise, quiet, implicit and imagined sound—can be identified as a sub-text, a hidden if uncertain history within otherwise silent media.’ Xiii.

⁷ Bachelard, Gaston. 1988. *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement*. Dallas Institute Publications, Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture.

⁸ Is it possible the medium of photography—as recording device, container of historical preservation, and projection of visual memory—can act as a potent conduit wherein an aural historical landscape can take shape? How are phenomenological frictions and textured fissures imbue a visual medium with aural potentiality?

⁹ Smith, Bruce R. 1999. *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor*. University of Chicago Press.

¹⁰ Heidegger, Martin. 2001. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. HarperCollins.

diffuses as a shapeless sigh reaches outward—an *afterquiet* transcends the static photographic frame as well as the recorded historical moment. This silence is a disintegrating apparition. Don Ihde's scholarship on the phenomenology of voice, the romantic historical methodology of Alexander Nemerov, and Jonathan Sterne's ideas of sound preservation, embalming and 'resonant tombs,' shape this final section on silence.

What follows is a cursory inventory of methodological structure and phenomenological analysis specific to one civil war photograph: from the *oeuvre* of Doctor Bontecou's, a portrait of Sergeant Brazer Wilsey. Who was this doctor instrumental in the nascent stages of photography? How are his collected photographs startling, uncanny and documented events? What can his project illuminate about the civil war, soldiers' bodies and the world of sound? In the first section, I explore the hushed solemnity of Wilsey's contemplative disposition and quiet interiority [*The Howl of the Necropolis: Hollow and Empty*]; next, the devastating effects of a bullet wound—as well as the inscribed trajectory of an imagined bullet in flight—emphasize the coated skin of the photograph's soundscape. In this etched indentation, the artist's hand dissects an already fragmented body [*Mute Wounds and Voiceless Bodies: Corpses and Embalming*]; finally, I conclude the paper with a discussion of echoes, phantom shapes, and the remnant traces of inaudible sound [*Ambulatory Ghosts and Screaming Echoes: A Silent Hush*]. Dr. Bontecou's 'Wilsey photograph' is the adhesive nexus of this paper.¹¹ The photograph represents not only the palpable silence of an emotively laden Civil War picture, but also the muteness of a fragmented—a literally war-torn—body. The haunted stillness of the photograph reveals a quivering blankness of sound. The picture embodies an already erased past.

In a photograph, the absent sound is temporally thick and spatially elongated. Musing on the auditory salience in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1948), David Toop writes: "To sound is to dive into the black abyss."¹² This kind of alternative phenomenological approach to the thicket of disquieting silence in photography structures this paper. How can a *still* photographic image be understood in terms of sound studies? Although recent scholarship has begun to thoroughly investigate the complex relational model between sound and image, there is a conspicuous void

¹¹ These spots folds time, Fold as an 'aesthetic fulcrum' Weiss on Merleau-Ponty, *Breathless*

¹² Toop, p. 63.

when thinking of photography and sound. This paper is a free-fall into the void of silence: in this flight, the poetic imagination of sound and image take shape.

Michel Chion's insight on both ambient silence and the 'auditory tracking shot' help in further establish our framework. Although writing on film, Chion's idea of sonar contrast, imagined noise, and the embodied fullness of silence seem sagacious. Chion explains, "The impression of silence in a film scene does not simply come from the absence of noise. It can only be produced as a result of context and preparation... So silence is never a neutral emptiness. It is the negative of sound we've heard before or imagined; it is the product of contrast."¹³ Whereas the visual component of cinema **(Chion would not appreciate this)** can be deconstructed to a single still frame, in the realm of sound there is no minimal unit. The edges of sound cannot be contained. Because of this, Chion posits sound can only be defined horizontally, the *audiovision* of a temporal drift.

In a recently published volume, *Media Technology and Literature in the Nineteenth Century*, Colette Colligan and Margaret Linley write, "The rapidly transforming environment of media discourse and media machines plugged into media networks contributed significantly to ways of knowing and experiencing the world, simultaneously reflecting, producing and recording alterations of consciousness and extensions of the human sensorium."¹⁴ In the mid-nineteenth century, various new media capable of inscription and transmission collapsed the smooth space-time continuum of history and memory. Revolutionary technologies of mimesis, representation and simulation did "more than simply alter the parameters of acoustic experience, the phonograph, like the earlier photograph and later the cinema, promised to alter the human relationship to phenomenal experience and to history more generally."¹⁵ These defamiliarizing new media were alchemically potent; ghostly presences of uncanny shadows were *embedded* in the technological holding power of recording devices.¹⁶ Don Ihde discusses the effects of noises and listening throughout the nineteenth-century. He suggests the 'birth of the electronic communication revolution' was a pregnant historical moment; in his words, 'a profound transformation of human experience.'¹⁷ Ihde

¹³ Chion, Michel. *AudioVision*. P. 57. Although an exegetical study in Film Studies

¹⁴ Colligan, Dr Colette, and Dr Margaret Linley. 2013. *Media, Technology, and Literature in the Nineteenth Century: Image, Sound, Touch*. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd. P. 2.

¹⁵ James Lastra. 2000. *Sound Technology and the American Cinema*. Columbia University Press. P. 22.

¹⁶ Scholarship in Sound Studies (film studies, media technology, even literary studies) has helped dismantle any residual logic of casual linearity in the development of audiovisual-reproduction technologies: **Emily Thompson, Vivian Sobchack's** erudite essay, 'When the Ear Dreams' and

¹⁷ Ihde, Don. 2012. *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound, Second Edition*. SUNY Press. P. 4.

continues: ‘our capacities for listening changed by technological culture,’ and posits, ‘these revolutions made us aware that once silent realms are in fact realms of sound and noise.’¹⁸

In a similar spirit, Alan Trachtenberg’s writes in monograph, *Lincoln’s Smile and Other Enigmas*: ‘Looking at photographed faces, tokens of familiarity and celebrity, making the world seem present in its absence, emerged as a defining act of modernity.’¹⁹ The medium of photography momentarily dislocated time and space imbuing the photograph with a set of quixotic and haunted possibilities: the recorded verisimilitude of visual representation, strange simulations of the body, and the infinite preservation of a temporal past, all complicated the coherency of historical space-time. Mark Smith notes, “Listening and hearing occurred in a context defined by the gravest constitutional issues and monumental slaughter, which were themselves inscribed with aural meanings that helped shape how and which events were heard.”²⁰ In the decades bracketing the American Civil War, the strangeness of photography was especially palpable. Literary scholar Stuart Burrows writes in his monograph, *Familiar Strangeness*, about a shift from a ‘mimetic representational economy—in which there are originals and copies—to a simulacra one, in which there are only copies.’ 16. A photograph is an optical transmission of absence; as shadow image, the photograph could circulate erased memories in a continual circuit. The photographic medium is a container with centrifugal potency: How can a soundscape be imagined in the traumatic silence of civil war photography? What kind of theoretical **deconstruction** is necessary in this kind of project? How does this particular photograph accomplish this? I explore the poetics of absent sound within the atmospheric quietude of Dr. Reed Bontecou’s *Brazer Wilsey* photograph. The uncanny nature of photography is amplified in Doctor Bontecou’s photography of medical portraiture.

The Howl of the Necropolis: Hollow and Empty

“It [the air] must be struck with a sudden sharp blow, if it is to sound - the movement of the whip must outrun the dispersion of the air, just as one might get in a stroke at a heap or whirl of sand as it was traveling rapidly past.”²¹

For the photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity. Even odder: it was *before* Photography that men had the most to say about the vision of the double.²²

In 1864, Doctor Reed Brockway Bontecou was perhaps the most prodigious American surgeon working. His momentous role in this history of both photography and medicine would not

¹⁸ Ibid. P. 5.

¹⁹ Trachtenberg, Alan. 2008 *Lincoln’s Smile and Other Enigmas*. Hill and Wang. P. 78.

²⁰ Smith, Mark Michael. 2001. *Listening to Nineteenth-century America*. UNC Press Books. P. 195

²¹ De lphi Complete works of Aristotle

²² Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Reprint. Hill and Wang, 2010. P. 12.

become clear, however, until the war's conclusion. Medical Historian Stanley Burns notes, "Reed Bontecou was responsible for pioneering, and taking, the largest number of photographs of wounded soldiers during the Civil War."²³ Who was Doctor Reed Bontecou? What does his career as chief surgeon and *amateur* photographer reveal about documentation and recording? How does the history of medical Civil War portraiture—the photograph as both anatomical diagram and aesthetically ambiguous composition—configure in the larger discourse of media technologies?

In the decade immediately prior to the war, Doctor Bontecou completed his medical residency and surgical training; at the commencement of the war he was recruited as a top medical officer of the New York Second Volunteer Infantry; by the war's end, Bontecou was chief surgeon of Washington's Harewood Hospital in Washington, serving over 3,000 beds. In his illustrative monograph, *Photography and the American Civil War*, Jeff Rosenheim states: "In May 1864, Bontecou started to photograph his patients with a carte-de-visite-format camera when they arrived from the field, before and after their surgeries, and upon recovery or the opposite."²⁴ In the aftermath of the war, Bontecou organized his collection of photographs into album books and finely cultivated compendiums of medical knowledge: his massive collection of anatomical specimens and portrait photography was the single largest contribution to the Army Medical Museum.²⁵ In the words of Robert I. Goler, "The photographic images of amputees constitute a silent dialogue on the trauma experienced by the injured veteran and the state. Unlike the cleaned, numbered, and often anonymous limbs in the case of the Army Medical Museum, these photographs depict recognizable individuals."²⁶ Brazer Wilsey's portrait is one of the many sitting soldiers captured under the lens of Doctor Bontecou. His face is recognizable and identifiable. Strangely, the surgeon's absent hands, too, are readily apparent the conspicuous annotation of a drawn in red arrow. A story of the photograph:

Forlorn and isolated in thought, Sergeant Brazer Wilsey sits with head bowed and brows furrowed (Figure 1). Wilsey's crimped neck, his fallen posture and his dejected facial expression each accentuate the photograph's sense of loss. His eyes are soft. His contemplative downward gaze

²³ <http://www.robertandersongallery.com/gallery/reed-bontecou/> medical historian Stanley Burns

²⁴ Rosenheim, Jeff L. 2013. *Photography and the American Civil War*. Metropolitan Museum of Art. P. 179.

²⁵ Rogers, Blair O. 2000. "Reed B. Bontecou, M.D.—His Role in Civil War Surgery and Medical Photography." *Aesthetic Plastic Surgery* 24 (2): 114–29. doi:10.1007/s002660010020.

²⁶ Robert I. Golber in Metz, Jonathan M., and Suzanne Poirier. 2005. *Difference and Identity: A Special Issue of Literature and Medicine*. JHU. P. 177

accentuates the elegiac mood, disassociated personhood, and the interiority of the photograph. This melancholic longing protracts time like a silent gesture of inhalation; in the first sphere of *inaudible temporal texture*, the historical past is spatially contained in an inward asphyxiating cry; the sounds of the past gradually *gather* like a pooling reservoir of opaque water. These sounds, like Wilsey, are vulnerable to the relentless flow of historical time.

The temporal dimension of this first ribbed-band of quietude is the interiority of a gasp—an open yawn composed of wrinkled aeration. This auditory funnel is akin to a wishing well—saturated *ad infinitum*; a pond holding the past, and visible only in darkness—that slowly accrues inaudible noise. It is within the arid lungs of the photograph’s auditory necropolis that the first dimension of silence is unveiled. In order to sculpt this interior hollow, I turn to Roland Barthes’ masterful account of photography in *Camera Lucida*—of specific interest are his ideas of temporal wounding and the *punctum*. Next, the scholarship of Alan Trachtenberg and Erin O’Connor outline the silent objectification of the body and emptied out memory. Last, Martin Heidegger’s essay, ‘The Thing,’ and Walter Benjamin’s *angel of history* help to negotiate the historical stakes of this project.

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes writes, “The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant; the photograph of the missing being, as Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a star.”²⁷ The delayed rays of the star touch the contemporary spectator; the photograph perpetually reaches out. Photography is a kind of pointed pierce; the picture punctures space; it is a wound that reiterates itself *ad infinitum*. Following Barthes and Sontag, the tactility of *the touch* seems to sumptuously imbricate the entire bodily sensorium: vision and sound, eyes and ears, noses and hands.

Let me also invoke the reveries of a more distant philosophical mind. Aristotle suggests the ontology of sound begins also with a similar process of ephemeral disruption: silent Air, is ‘struck with a sudden sharp blow’ and interrupts the sonar stillness. Thus, pregnant silence gives birth to sound. Is it possible to read this primal auditory wound—a phenomenological blow to the silent air that sparks sound—as analogous to the *touch* of the ‘missing being’ in the photograph? Both vision and sound alike confront a threshold; an absent and empty tomb is pierced, a veil is lifted. The photograph, as ‘emanation of the referent,’ is a haunted shadow that uncannily lingers. Like silence, the blank body in the photograph is most present in its absence. We need a ray of light.

²⁷ Barthes, Roland. 2010. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Reprint. Hill and Wang. P 72.

Perhaps the apparitional *star rays* of the Brazer Wilsey photograph **uniquely** disrupt the sensorium. The quivering quietude of Wilsey's photograph is the hush of a sigh. Wilsey's exposed soul and abject body gasp at the instantaneity of death: his own, the photographic instantaneity, his forever scarred shoulder. The sonic tissue of the photograph is like the fragility of a softened yawn receding in perpetuity: the inaccessibility of a final surrendered release. The imagined silence in this first wrinkle of sound is an *audiovisual* analogue of the Heideggerean jug: The insular hollow is a vacuum of inaudible noise. In an analogous **mood**, Heidegger writes, "The empty space, this nothing of the jug, is what the jug is as the holding vessel."²⁸ Two different Civil War photographs may further elucidate the salience of inaudible sounds. Both of these pictures show us *places* in Harewood Hospital. This *sense of place* may offer a different window into the haunted silence of the Wilsey photograph. Perhaps the pathos of these open and blank spaces bespeaks a similar inaudible gravitas. How can the *placeness* of these two photographs further exemplify the texture of silence in the Wilsey photograph? What do places of trauma, tragedy and suffering bespeak when imagining the past? Why are these two spots particularly saturated with the aural register of the civil war, Wilsey and Doctor Bontecou?

Sound is that which shivers and shakes a body, prolonging its shuddering, making its boundaries insecure, interfering with the spatiotemporal distinctiveness that constitutes a body... Air is the body of sound, in the sense that it is the occasion, medium or theatre of sound. But sound is equally the body of air—air gathered into form, given itinerary, intensity and intent. In either case, the body is a stressed body, a body in and of duress.²⁹

Figure 2.

The interiority of this dark resin cauldron is a thick silence percolating in perpetual flux. The open inwardness of this cavity is a receding abyss.

The photograph shows the eerie quietude of an empty mess hall.

I read this picture as substantially more than an illustration of auditory quietude. The evacuated space is saturated with steely quietude and atmospheric stillness: the silent floor patiently seems to wait. A legless patient floats in central mid-foreground of the hall : absent are the rhythmic pitter-patter of footsteps, the cacophonous clanging of dishes, or the whistling hiss of

Quote, Louisa May Alcott: "To and fro rushed matrons, maids and convalescent "boys," skirmishing with knives and forks; retreating with empty plates; marching and counter-marching, with unvaried success, while the clash of busy spoons made most inspiring music for the charge of our Light Brigade" 38 *Hospital Sketches*

²⁸ Heidegger, Martin. P.

²⁹ <http://www.sonorities.org.uk/symposium> Steven Connor, 'Sound and the Pathos of Air' <http://www.sonorities.org.uk/symposium>

Figure 3.

The *inaudible temporal texture* of this silence is a kind of pulsating lung: vibrational air coagulates in an inaudible chamber of darkness. The aerated silence is an inward spiral, vertiginously twirling in continual dilation. The shape of sound is smooth and

An emotive palpability resonates in the gaps of photography, interiority, and silence.

A liquid, Silent seeping away; the floorboards of the ward

The diaphragm of the hospital The wind; longing and melancholy; vibrations;

Windows: Mesmerizing and Terrifying

Melancholic nod toward the finality of a restless sleep.

Sleep and dreams. To disappear into the infinitude of gentle darkness

A silent spherical incantation

Perpetually fleeting (Benjamin's *angel of history*); "The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again."³⁰

Wilsey, the lightness and effervescence of the past dissipates into a cauldron of similar blank space; suspended in time.

Mute Wounds and Voiceless Bodies: Corpses and Embalming

The Wound Dresser
Bearing the bandages, water and sponge,
Straight and swift to my wounded I go,
Where they lie on the ground after the battle brought in,
Where their priceless blood reddens the grass the ground,
Or to the rows of the hospital tent, or under the roof'd hospital,
To the long rows of cots up and down each side I return,
To each and all one after another I draw near, not one do I miss,
An attendant follows holding a tray, he carries a refuse pail,
Soon to be fill'd with clotted rags and blood, emptied, and fill'd again.
Walt Whitman

"Both embalming and recording 'protect' future audiences by transforming a substance in the present in anticipation of the future: the chemical transformation of the body was to have its analogue in the physical transformation of sound in the process of recording."³¹

The second *inaudible temporal texture* of silence I want to investigate is a kind of unutterable wound. Spatially, this tier of photographic silence is a flattened slit—the sound of silence is

³⁰ Benjamin, Walter. 1968. *Illuminations*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. P. 25.

³¹ Sterne, p. 294.

visualized as a blank tableau quaking with magnetic adhesion; here, the elasticity of historical time is frozen on a smooth mirror-like surface. The air of this fragmented breath is motionless. As a medical specimen—an object of scientific dissection, and a tool of medical diagnostics—the Brazer Wilsey photograph is silent. The photograph is a kind of mute incision, a sutured mouth denying sonic entry, the pierce of an arrow lodged in place. Alan Trachtenberg posits in *Reading American Photographs*, “Their [Dr. Bontecou’s medical portraits] detachment from themselves, the objectification of their bodies even in their own eyes, is evident from the absence of embarrassment at dropped trousers to display a scar.”³² The picture is pejoratively passive and penetrable. The photograph is a frozen conduit: both Wilsey’s body and the photograph itself a place of inscription. In this section, temporality is opaquely still and silently refuses; this tonal silence is like a closed window, an embalmed corpse whose closed mouth denies any entrance: this is a silence of flattened volumetric space wherein a surface etching records an inscription. The scholarship of Allan Trachtenberg and Robert Goler help us to consider mid-nineteenth century notions of silence and portraiture. James Lastra’s scholarship is also relevant for this discussion, specifically his ideas of *writing* in new media. Broadly, I will consider the phenomenological spectrum of the photograph’s deadness. I posit myriad ways the static temporal pliability of the Wilsey photograph can elucidate sonar edges in the second auditory realm of vibrational stasis.

The Wilsey portrait illuminates the frailty of the human condition: the fallibility of the human body, the vulnerability to physical pain, and the exasperated sigh of a devastated spirit are each on display. This portrait humbly reveals the wounded body of Sergeant Brazer Wilsey. The photograph is a blank tableau: objectified and silent, mute and anonymous. As a medical specimen, the voice of Brazer Wilsey is silent; he has been deflated and suspended indefinitely within the hospital walls. The portrait is a cold closed mouth: his breath suffocates in isolated strangeness. The void of the blank hospital walls—white, empty and pale—threaten to further constrict his motionless body. Erin O’Connor convincingly argues that medical portraiture ‘anonymizes the subject:’ *to be made silent*. O’Connor’s reminds us that Civil War medical photography emphasized the defunct and imperfect, deformed and inglorious. She argues Civil War medical portraiture silences subjectivity, reiterating the objectification of already once wounded bodies. Robert Goler similarly articulates the unwavering illegibility of Civil War medical portraiture. He states: “Their ambiguous relationship to late-nineteenth-century aesthetic conventions makes these images even more disturbing. James T. H. Connor and Michael Rhode have noted that the style of the veteran

³² Trachtenberg, Alan. 1990. *Reading American Photographs*. Hill and Wang.

photographs differ little from the style of photographs produced by professional photography studios of the era.”³³ An uncanny disquietude permeates the surface flatness of these photographs. Compositionally, the finely manicured and fastidiously positioned bodies appear to embrace their injuries; simultaneously however, the portraits tragically reveal a disheveled destitution of traumatically dismembered bodies: a kind of melancholic evacuation of agency and a mournful loss of identity haunt the pictures. Here I quote O’Connor at length:

“It is to recognize the medical photograph’s formal complexities, to understand its continuity with portraiture and still life on the one hand; and to recognize its generic uniqueness on the other, its capacity to abstract its distressing subject so thoroughly that the person pictured comes to frame the picture of disease...What haunts the medical photograph is the certainty that there is no object to take, only a subject to erase, only the possibility of metonymy, of surface standing in for depth, of separate faces signifying a set type.”³⁴

Perhaps the potential erasure of both subject and subjectivity imbue the Wilsey photograph with a silence of vulnerability: “There is no object to take, only a subject to erase.” (O’Connor) Goler writes specifically about the photograph as site of visual objectification and vocal muteness. He states: “The men, sometimes naked or partially draped in sheets, and sometimes exposing only the stumps of their limbs, sit or stand in the poses of conventional portraiture, leaning on upholstered chairs and set against an ornamental backdrop of drapery. An almost grotesque tension results between the horrific wounds and the placid domestic settings in which they are displayed.”³⁵ His work explores the thresholds clinical documentation, aesthetic motivation and conventional portraiture: nonchalant pictorial banality, strangely uncanny *mise-en-scene*, and the futility of technological preservation, each constitutive elements of Bontecou’s ‘genre.’ Could the offensively blasé and nonchalant depiction of scarred bodies inaudibly *reperform* the trauma of battle? Why does the ghostly facelessness of the Wilsey photograph quake with a silent pathos? How is the medium of photography imbricated in the medical pathos of anatomical study and diagnostic instrumentation? These questions are implicit in the following discussion.

The precision of the photograph is unwavering in its visual meticulousness: the capaciousness of scrupulous detail and optical accuracy is uncanny. The compulsion to exactitude strives for visual entirety. Simultaneously however, the photograph’s totality as an optical blanket of vision, suffocates the surface. The photograph has no residual traces: the evacuated blankness is a visual analog to Wilsey’s suffocated breath. James Lastra poignantly writes, ‘with the camera and

³³ Goler, p. 169.

³⁴ Erin O’Connor, “Camera Medica: Towards a Morbid History of Photography,” *History of Photography* 23:3 (Autumn 1999): 232-244 https://www.rochester.edu/in_visible_culture/Issue_5/ConnorRhode/ConnorRhode.html

³⁵ Goler, 169-170.

photochemistry, images appeared to have become ‘autographic’—capable of inscribing themselves.³⁶ This mystifying process of immediacy and effortless *audiovisual* reproduction sparked contentious debate about the *copy* and the *real*. The medium of photography destabilized vision, authenticity and presence. Here I evoke again Roland Barthes’ aphoristic reflection on photography: *the thing has been there*. Wilsey’s hollow body, Bontecou’s forensic mapping, and the scarred residue of bullet wound. Each **slice** an uncanny stain—a mysterious scar imbued with furtive remnant of the past. His portrait portrays an objectified other self; the ghost of Wilsey levitates under the anatomical weight of a scarred shoulder bearing the traces of the past. Longing for bodily reconstruction, the chilled unutterability of trauma freezes even the silent echoes of the photograph.

The Wilsey photograph is unabashedly personalized. How so? Directly above Wilsey’s heart is a drawn-in red arrow—an annotation, an additive mark, perhaps a kind of scar. The line traces the ballistic trajectory of an imagined bullet; the strange inscription pierces the surface of Wilsey’s flattened corpse-like body. This piercing wound is not one of Eros and love; rather instead this is a different kind of Cupid arrow: Cupid’s sling of arrows now only a sling supporting a severed left arm; his wounds of love now palpable in wounds of flesh. This conspicuously scribed arrow—notated with Dr. Bontecou’s red ink and imbued with his own artistic sensibilities—is a written inscription. James Lastra writes convincingly about the texture of media and transferability of inscription. He states, “Metaphors of writing imply the concepts of inscription and storage, as well as a medium’s relationship to language and legibility.”³⁷ The photographic medium is a form of writing: a photograph records and transcribes impressions of light. As a printed document, the photograph is also vulnerable—temporally and materially—to further inscriptive manipulation. Bontecou’s penned red notation was an additive imprint, a medium-specific recorded engraving, and a vessel for the storage of clinical medical diagnostic. As a medium of documentation, preservation and transmission, the photograph was ideal for Bontecou’s anatomical projects and surgical processes. Jeff Rosenheim posits in *Photography and the American Civil War*, “the dramatic effects of these notations well served the purposes of the doctor as a teacher and a graphic artist.”³⁸ As well as an anatomical remapping of the body, the photo is a scarred record of the past. The pathos of the forensic—diagnostic tool, medical atomization and surgical dissection—is constitutive of this impulse to diagram.

³⁶ Lastra, p.23

³⁷ Ibid. p. 22.

³⁸ Rosenheim, P.

Dr. Bontecou's red arrow annotations onto Wilsey's body, under the guise of medicine, are a stamped smudge of memory: historical time collapses in the picture. The drawn arrow and the lodged bullet each puncture different temporal registers of the picture. 'What like a bullet can undeceive' writes Melville in his poem, 'Shiloh;' his somber words seem appropriate as we stare at the sutures and sling, bullet wound and blood in this 1865 photograph. Medically, Dr. Bontecou's red notation traces the ostensible flight path of a now imaginary bullet; a set of seven outlined stitches on his left arm, as well as the two puncture holes bracketing his shoulder, are stained with similar blood red ink. Longfellow writes, 'sudden and swift a whistling ball came out of a wood, and the voice was still.' The whistling instantaneity of death unknown and calm is here carved out in the bullet's path.

Formally, however, the arrow horizontally bifurcates the photograph; it also helps to construct a frame within. Parallel vertical lines – the stitched left arm, the ropes sling, the curve of his back – as well as horizontal parallels – the arrow, the sling, his legs – create a type of rectangular grid imprinted over Wilsey's chest. Immediately below his neck and shoulders, the red arrow also visually severs Wilsey's head from body. Bontecou's red arrow acts only to accentuate the photograph's emptiness and mournful inaudibility. I understand this forensic impulse as an *a priori* strand of melancholic yearning. The indexical stamp of Dr. Bontecou's red arrow a further reminder of historical tragedy and trauma. "The work of horror" writes Adriana Cavarero, 'does not concern imminent death from which one flees, trembling, but rather the effects of a violence that labors at slicing, at the undoing of the wounded body and then the corpse, at opening it up and dismembering it.'³⁹ The annotated blood red lines puncture Wilsey's chest, his heart pierced with pathos of sorrow and inchoate emptiness. Wilsey's once unified body is presented here as fragmented parts: his tilted head, his wounded middle section, and his absent legs and hands, are the remains of a scarred human spirit.

Ambulatory Ghosts and Screaming Echoes: A Silent Hush

"Then, the landscape of Virginia was all witchy. Blasted into perfect nothingness, it made a nice clear ground only for antimonuments reasserting and even memorably articulating a choked, hollow lack of meaning."⁴⁰

"It is from this sheer contingency, this unmediated reference, as Barthes portrays it, that there arises the 'new *punctum*:' the intense apparition of time and what it implies—the actuality of a life that existed, and, twisted inseparably with it, the inevitability of the death that lay in wait for it."⁴¹

³⁹ Cavarero, Adriana. *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*. Columbia University Press, 2011. p. 12.

⁴⁰ Nemerov, Alexander. 2010. *Acting in the Night: Macbeth and the Places of the Civil War*. University of California Press. P. 215.

In this final section I approach the future reverberating echoes—evaporated, drifting and breathing—within the quietude of the photograph. The silence is a vector-like projectile, bodily and externalized: the dead voices are a torturous silent scream. Alexander Nemerov posits, “The chant of the photograph, as much as that of the witches, conjures an alien space.”⁴² The quixotic reverb of the photograph, much like the uncanny howl of Macbeth’s witches, dissipates into atmospheric darkness. Similarly, there is kind of embodied textured grain within the resonant haze of this final auditory register: the quietude is a pulsating vibrational release—a drumming chant and phantom specter glide out of space and time. The exteriority of noise reverberates like a gaseous inaudible howl. This noiseless thicket of silence is a blank vapor directed into the future. How does the photograph perform this silence? What is the function of metaphor within this absent reverberating echo of nothingness? What is the relationship between photography, embalming, and preservation? This discussion considers myriad nineteenth-century conceptions of chemical embalming, sound recording, and the voices of the dead. I then read closely both a painting and a different single photograph: resurrection, ambulatory ghosts, and the angels of the past are the stakes of this meditation.

Jonathan Sterne writes: “Recording was the product of a culture that had learned to can and to embalm, to preserve the bodies of the dead so that they could continue to perform a social function after life. The nineteenth century’s momentous battle against decay offered a way to explain sound recording.”⁴³ Bontecou’s photography, also, is imbued with an apparition of silent lost voices. Wilsey’s absent voice is an evacuated blankness; the mute shadow a reminder of loss and longing, an *archived document* trapped in walls of the hospital. His blank coffin-like body seems most similar to a floating corpse. Although sitting upright, I am interested in the flattened religious pathos of the photograph. He is like a man kneeling in his final resting confessional: a shadow of his former self, a body branded with battle wounds, a confined medical specimen. I quote Trachtenberg: “Faces staged as public events became available for intimate viewing...More important than exact formulas for staging faces before the camera was the pervasive cultural supposition that a picture manifested innerness.”⁴⁴ As objects of visual delectation and scientific excavation, what kind of *innerness* is recorded and preserved? How can we simultaneously talk about the anatomical objectification and

⁴¹ Rabate, Jean-Michel. 2012. *Writing the Image After Roland Barthes*. University of Pennsylvania Press. P.

⁴² Nemerov, P. 219.

⁴³ Sterne, 292.

⁴⁴ Trachtenberg, p. 78-79.

the private interiority of the photograph? Does the careful documentary impulse of the photographs amplify the disquietude of the soldiers' ghosts?

While the medical ambitions of Dr. Reed Brockway Bontecou are vividly on display, the photograph offers more than a diagrammatic record of battle wounds and trauma. Bontecou's photograph also reveals the humbling vulnerability of man: the lingering silences and solemn echoes of history quake in the picture. Jeff Rosenheim reminds us: "There is no precedent for these intense portraits of a patient's and a doctor's shared inner sanctum."⁴⁵ Perhaps confronting the face of death with such gravity and regularity motivated Doctor Bontecou, "to meticulously record complete patient histories of all the soldiers he photographed."⁴⁶ Sterne suggests, "If there was a defining figure in early accounts of sound recording, it was the possibility of preserving the voice beyond the death of the speaker...a defining characteristic was the ephemerality of sound recordings."⁴⁷ Similar to the ephemerality of sound recording, these dead noises of the photograph hover forward in a frameless reverberating chamber. Wilsey's mordant stare seems to look *into* the past—his head gently hangs, as his eyes solemnly gaze downward into an empty wall of nothingness. His handless arms are severed in the finely composed frame of the photograph. It is as if Wilsey himself is mummified, perpetually preserved within the photograph's empty flat screen.

Maybe this was especially salient throughout the mid-nineteenth century. Daniel Novak writes, "If for many photographic theorists, photography is defined by a faithful recording of a single frozen moment, for the Victorians, photography goes beyond the time and place of the photographic present, making it able to depict absent things to ourselves and others."⁴⁸ The Wilsey photograph shows us this ineffability and evanescence: there is strange transcendent potential in his long-deceased body. Again I cite Sterne:

"From the end of the Civil War through the remainder of the nineteenth century, the popularity of chemical embalming grew to a point where it eclipsed other approaches to the preservation of the dead. The exteriority of function had overcome the internal consistency of form. The desirability of preserving a corpse's outward appearance overcame concerns about altering the internal composition of the body."⁴⁹

A photograph is an embalmed memory: it is a silent mirage, a projection of death, and ineluctable absence. The Wilsey photograph is this kind of embalmed arena; it is a recorded relic of revelatory

⁴⁵ Rosenheim, P. 179.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 179

⁴⁷ Sterne, p. 287.

⁴⁸ Novak, Daniel A. 2008. *Realism, Photography and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*. Cambridge University Press. P. 85. Novak's compelling discussion of Victorian photographic culture further complicates Roland Barthes' readings of photographic temporality and narrative legibility. Further, (Abrahmose, Shlomo Lee) "Unlike the first *punctum*, this second *punctum* does not relate to physical details in the photograph, but rather to time...."

⁴⁹ Sterne, 296.

quietude. Alan Trachtenberg states: “They [medical portraits] disclose the most immediate and least comprehensible of war’s facts, that it is waged on tangible human flesh and inscribed in pain—the living wounded body as the final untellable legend.”⁵⁰ As a melancholic scar of the past, the picture is implacably inaudible and infinitely inaccessible.

And yet still, in this calmly disappearing abyss, the acoustic shadows of the past tremble in silence. The *noiselessness* is an ambulatory ghost—weightless, opaque and immaterial. How so? Here I want to employ a different set of terms from Sterne’s scholarship: *voices of the dead* and *resonant tombs*.

“The *voices of the dead* is a striking figure of exteriority. Because it comes from within the body and extends out into the world, speech is traditionally considered as both interior and exterior, both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the limits of subjectivity. In contrast, the voices of the dead no longer emanate from bodies that serve as containers for self-awareness. The recording is, therefore, a resonant tomb, offering the exteriority of the voice with none of its interior self-awareness.”⁵¹

The photograph *is* silent interiority; it also *acts* to silence the exteriority of shapeless voices: Bontecou’s hands, Wilsey’s body, the mechanical apparatus, a bullet, a surgery, a lost hospital space, all erased. A permeating sadness scours the surface; our fallen soldier—an American angel of sorrow—silently drifts out of time. However, the poetic ephemerality of the picture also inevitably has endured profound suffering.

In 1876, during the Centennial Exposition of American Independence in Philadelphia, Bontecou’s Civil War medical photographs were on display. The nearby Army Medical Museum took part in this commemorative event by loaning the Bontecou’s photographs to the US Army Medical Hospital. Robert Goler writes, “The symbolic transformation of these images from representations of suffering and loss to representations of medical progress, from wounded individuals to decorously draped subjects of military pride, suggests how quickly perceptions of these woundings transformed—or at least how quickly the army sought to transform their meaning.”⁵² Further, a model hospital was built for the public in hopes of displaying the significant developments in medicine, surgical operations and scientific advancements. This was also the first time the public had access to Bontecou’s melancholic photographs. Consider this: ‘In the same pavilion, visitors could view the amputee photographs and illustrated medical histories as well as a

⁵⁰ Trachtenberg, p. 116.

⁵¹ Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past* pg. 290

⁵² Robert Goler’s chapter, ‘Loss and the Persistence of Memory’ in Metzl, Jonathan M., and Suzanne Poirier. 2005. *Difference and Identity: A Special Issue of Literature and Medicine*. JHU Press. P. 178.

massive portrait of Dr. Samuel Gross, recently completed by Thomas Eakins.⁵³ In some kind of ventriloquizing gesture, the absent Doctor Bontecou is replaced by the now present Dr. Samuel Gross. Thomas Eakins' 8 foot painting had been recently unveiled. The phenomenological stakes of this discussion are the *human voice*, or perhaps more evocatively, *Voicelessness*.⁵⁴

Walter Benjamin writes: 'to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.'⁵⁵ Doctor Bontecou's astounding work in photography and medicine is a history saturated with this kind of Benjaminian epiphonic potency. On the one hand, Bontecou's project was unequivocally an attempt to record the portraiture of soldiers and also document surgical operations during the Civil War; it was also, however, an attempt to breathe new *Sebastian-like life* into the bodily remains and traumatic historical memory of mid-nineteenth century America. Perhaps rather than Cupid's quixotic potion of Eros and Arrows, there is a more salient analog—both visual and historical—for the Wilsey photograph, a different tale of wounding and resurrection: namely, Saint Sebastian and the iconic depictions of his martyrdom.

Saint Sebastian, similar to Doctor Bontecou's photograph of Sergeant Brazer Wilsey, is shown violently marked with arrows. Representations of the oft-noted 'Gay Saint' show a virile young soldier commonly wearing a loincloth, his body pierced with arrows and bound to a tree; brazen arrowheads penetrate his skin and bloody stains of punctured holes scatter across his saintly body (Figure 4).. Both of our vulnerable and solitary male soldiers are marked with fleshy lacerations; concurrently however, their young male faces appear almost too insouciantly still, calmly bowing as if to solemnly accept an ultimate saintly suffering. A naive purity and grace surround both of their erotically softened bodies; their heads nod in quieted gestures of pain. Sebastian was ultimately saved from the gash wounds of these arrows, albeit only briefly, as if temporarily resurrected to new life. Sergeant Brazer Wilsey has similarly been marked twice: stained first with a lead ball of heat and then again with a red pen of ink outlining the ballistic path. He has been indexed, traced, and again wounded. The ghostly echoes of the past reverberate in Bontecou's photograph, as do the shadows of Wilsey's post war life: a kind of unwavering faith; a surrender in gracious repose to the violence of bullets arrows; resurrected spirit. Walter Benjamin's *angel of history*

⁵³ Ibid. 179. For more reading and a thoroughly detailed account of 'The Gross Clinic' and this historical event at large, Goler's scholarship is a good place to begin

⁵⁴ Quote, 20. Emily Thompson discusses constructions of auditoriums, power of the voice; questions of acoustics and reverb. P. 20

⁵⁵ Benjamin, 255.

can only solemnly gaze, mesmerized with the accruing pile of rubble and suffering: 'his face is turned towards the past.' In this spirit of gracious repose and contemplative quietude the Wilsey photograph is a final surrender: a ghost watches as his own phantom history unfolds in the mournful smoke and evaporated quietude of time.