"The Reason I've Been Talking About all of These Dead People: Cultural Resistance in Laurie Anderson's *Nerve Bible*"

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In a 1995 radio interview for KPFA in San Francisco, the interviewer asked Laurie Anderson, if an artist has the power to inspire, should there be some obligation for the artist to be able to articulate their social ideas, issues, causes, etc. Anderson replied:

> It depends on the artist . . . a lot of artists are more socially engaged, like myself. I'm very interested in political situations, particularly now and how personal politics have become. When you talk about politics in this country now, you're not talking about European trade agreements. You're talking about Newt's book deal, Bill and Hillary, O.J. Simpson. All of these issues, for example, the biggest one, which is, is there an ideal family . . . so, you've got like powerful things being played out, powerful personal things being played out in the political arena. And it's a very, very fascinating time now to see how the personal and the political intersect. So, I think in those cases, some artists have responsibilities.[1]

The intersection of the personal and the political seems central to Anderson's performances. Through her examination of political, social, and personal life in contemporary America, Anderson gives us a glimpse into how American ideology constructs and perpetuates itself. Or, as Rosemarie Bank puts it, Anderson seeks to uncover "cognitive authority, (what truth is and who gets to decide.)"[2]

Though it may be argued that the master's tools will never bring down the master's house, Anderson seems to believe, as Philip Auslander puts it, that politically engaged artists should use "against the edifice the instruments or stones available in the house."[3] By using the TV variety show form within the context of live theatrical performance, Anderson has mastered an easily recognizable and digestible form while at the same time using that very form to expose cultural ideology. Herman Rappaport refers to this process as "miming," appropriating the mechanisms of contemporary American culture and exposing the illusory unifications or metanarratives it creates.[4] Culture is not stagnant. Each culture

contains forces that work to maintain the status quo while allowing some amount of play within the system to avoid stagnation or maximum entropy.

Laurie Anderson seems to adopt the formal aspects of television flow—a montage of images and information in a pre-planned sequence of events. Raymond Williams developed his concept of television flow in *Television: Technology and Cultural Form.* Williams argues that the experience of television is derived from the flow of programming.[5] Meaning, in television, is relational: the relation between a program's content, the commercials and other interruptions, and the whole evening's programming all help to create meaning for the viewer.[6]

Though you will not find commercials or newsbreaks in Anderson performances—shorter pieces intersperse longer dialogues, operating in the same formal manner as commercials in the TV programming sequence. When William's concept of flow is applied to an Anderson performance, textual meaning, like meaning in television, may derive from (1) a reading of a particular piece of the performance, (2) the flow of images, words, and sounds within the performance, and (3) the flow of images and information from the cultural context into the performance. The shape of an Anderson performance resembles television flow. Meaning in *Nerve Bible*, like meaning in television, is relational or intertextual.

How can a strategy which may be said to keep viewers critically unengaged (television flow) be used by Anderson to keep viewers critically engaged? Why does the same strategy work differently in the two contexts? The reason the strategy operates differently is because the space in which the performance is presented is different. Anderson performs in a theater in which the audience sits in the dark beyond the proscenium line. The act of watching television occurs within the home and is therefore linked to the flow of household activities.[7] Television viewing at home is rarely done completely in the dark; the lights stay on in order to blend household and television flow.

In the theater, the audience has set aside the 2 hours or so for the specific purpose of watching the live performance. At home, bathroom breaks, snack breaks, answering the telephone, and other household activities interrupt the program continually. In the theater, any of these activities are usually performed before or after the show or at intermission. When we attend a live theatrical performance, we tend to treat the performance as a discrete unit; we do not want it interrupted.[8]

Laurie Anderson takes television flow into a space that normally presents works as discrete units (self-contained, with no interruptions). Since television flow is inserted into a different context, it has a different effect. Instead of the negative criterion of flow (unengaged audiences), Laurie Anderson uses flow in

a positive manner, to engage audiences. Anderson uses technology to maintain audience attention while she uses content to engage the audiences critically.

Laurie Anderson's *Nerve Bible*

Anderson's latest multi-media tour, *Nerve Bible* in 1995, resembled vaudeville theatre but with well over 30 tons of electronic equipment. The evening's performance consisted of songs, monologues, dialogues between electronically distorted characters, instrumentals, special visual and vocal effects, video projections, and stylized movement. All of this seemingly performed and executed by Laurie Anderson—she is the only person to ever appear on stage. The event is a mixture of rock concert, stand-up comedy, personal anecdotes, and character sketches—a variety show.

Many of the monologues appear as a string of stories around a vaguely similar topic. Never do stories appear by themselves; they only appear within a monologue sequence or as the introduction to a song. Take, for example, Anderson's monologue on her past experiences as a college instructor:

> You know I taught history for a while at night school at various colleges around New York City. And it was art history, Egyptian architecture and Assyrian sculpture and I wasn't really a professional art historian so I wasn't exactly keeping up with the Egyptological journals and the facts were just starting to fade so I would be talking to the class and a slide would come up on the screen of some pyramid or ziggurat and I would look up at the screen and I would draw a complete blank. I couldn't remember a single thing about it. So, I would just make things up. You know, a story about this or that Pharaoh and the students would write it down and I would test them on it. Now eventually this sort of caught up with me, you know the students would mention these stories a year later and so on. And also I did feel some guilt about just making up history. So, I finally quit. Not before I was fired but it was very, very close.

Anderson transitions from this story into Stephen Hawking's theory of black holes. She says,

> But you know, I always wondered if anyone remembered any of these stories. Or what happened to them. Or where they went. And you know Stephen Hawking has a theory about information and where it goes when it disappears. And according to this

> theory when a black hole implodes all the information about the objects that have disappeared begins to skid down an infinitely long tunnel. All those numbers and calculations and deviations are swirling around in a huge whirlwind.

Then Anderson quickly moves into the next bit:

> So here are the questions: Is time long or is it wide? Are things getting better or are they getting worse? What if things just keep getting faster and faster until no one can keep up any more at all? And can we start all over again?

Immediately after this, Anderson breaks into another personal anecdote—this time regarding an interview she conducted with John Cage. She asked Cage if we (as a species) were getting better or worse. And Cage replied that we were getting better. "I'm sure of it," he said.

The thin thematic thread that ties these first two stories together is the thread of teaching and information. But Anderson suddenly drops into a meditation on the state of human evolution. Anderson shifts from stand-up mode rapidly into more documentary-style material in the discussion of Hawking's theory of black holes.

Looking at the string of discrete units thematically throughout Act One, a long distance view of the flow emerges. Act One starts and ends with discussions of death. In "My Grandmother's Hats," the very first piece of the performance, Anderson speaks of the day her grandmother died in the hospital. The song "Love Among the Sailors" deals with AIDS. We hear the words of the deceased John Cage and Walter Benjamin. By the end of the act, Anderson tells the story of a near death experience she had while on a trip in the mountains of Tibet. This latter story begins with the phrase, "the reason I've been talking about all of these dead people," a reference and hint to the thematic unity of the first act.

Each of the separate pieces of *Nerve Bible* seems to fit into a thematic flow of meaning. The teaching story/Stephen Hawking series of monologues from act one frame the entire performance well. *Nerve Bible* seems to center around information and the way humans communicate. Even death becomes a metaphor for the loss of information. With the death of each person, a wealth of information is lost— personal stories, experience, beliefs, thoughts, etc. Anderson structures much of the show around the repeated phrase, "Remember me is all I ask, And if remembered be a task forget me." The parallel between the death of her father and the loss of information seems strongest in the song "World Without End." Anderson chants,

When my father died we put him in the ground
When my father died it was like a whole library
Had burned down.
World without end remember me.

The body (Anderson's father's body) then becomes a parallel to thousands of volumes of books—information stored on documents. These documents themselves are then transitory; they may disappear at any moment in fire. Anderson remarks that the title, *Nerve Bible*, refers to the body.[9] Anderson's bible/body then becomes a sign of a container for information. The opening video sequence of the *Nerve Bible* performance flashed the images of a burning book with the words "Nerve Bible" superimposed over it. Information is stored in the container/body/bible and then is burned away. At the end of *Nerve Bible*, Anderson disappears in a swirling vortex created by lasers and smoke, metaphorically like the information in Stephen Hawking's version of black holes—a visual representation of Anderson's own death.

But how does this thin, thematic flow actually expose dominant ideologies? Resistance in an Anderson performance occurs primarily within each discrete unit, or, at what Raymond Williams called "close-range flow."[10] In order to understand each discrete unit, the context must be taken into account.

One particular piece from *Nerve Bible*, which I have called "You Rang," exposes scientific metanarratives via the use of an electronically created, variety show character. Here's the text:

You rang
Remember me
A Black Hole
A Red Dwarf
You rang
And you, I've seen your telescopes
I've read your stories
and you
Vanishingly thin
And when you disappear
You're shocked
You rang
You rang (more intense)

This piece is performed by Anderson from the extreme side of the stage (almost in the wings) while the image of her face is captured by a small camera and

projected onto two large video screens in the center of the stage. The camera, however, distorts Anderson's face, only picking up half of her face and projecting this one half onto both screens. One screen is inverted so we think we are seeing a full human head on stage when we are actually just seeing the same one side of Anderson's face projected onto both screens. This image of Anderson's face is deeply saturated with color and is actually shown in negative and not positive image.

The voice and image she uses here create a new variety show character for Anderson. She calls this bizarre entity a "black hole" and a "red dwarf." This "black hole" is a human being in negative, a wrathful entity standing at a doorway to our world, able to peer in at our "telescopes" and watch us as we "disappear" or die. "The Black Hole" may then be seen as a paradigm for the performance content—a bringer of death.

As scientists like Stephen Hawking knock at this door and attempt to answer questions with their telescopes, they seem to have coaxed a response from this entity, a harsh "You Rang," or, subtextually, "what do you want?" Anderson has created a mythological being not unlike an Old Testament God; her "black hole" is a human being in negative, mysterious and omnipotent.

Anderson does not seem as interested in the theoretical part of Hawking's work as in how he tells his story. She does not try to fully explain Hawking's theory of black holes—the piece is too brief. Instead, she exposes Hawking's means of telling his-story, which he seems to discuss at times in biblical hyperbole. Carl Sagan notes Hawking's own hyperbole in the introduction to the book, *A Brief History of Time*:

> This is also a book about God . . . or perhaps about the absence of God. The word God fills these pages. Hawking embarks on a quest to answer Einstein's famous question about whether God had any choice in creating the Universe. Hawking is attempting, as he explicitly states, to understand the mind of God.[11]

Sagan acknowledges Hawking's use of "God" as a means of communicating complex physics to a general public, using the popular image of the creator god and the creation myth to represent the complex theories of quantum mechanics and cosmology. Hawking seeks to explain the Big Bang, but cosmology and quantum mechanics have not become so simple that the general public can understand it all. Instead, as Anderson shows, scientists (like Hawking) use familiar tropes with which to explain their research. Scientists, like

performers, must couch their information within cultural forms to communicate more easily outside of their own circles.

Hawking seems to want to rewrite the Book of Genesis, offering his own version of the beginnings of the universe. He wants to attempt to bring "the word" to "his people" about how God created the universe. He concludes that "at the big bang and other singularities, all the laws [of physics] would have broken down, so God would still have had complete freedom to choose what happened and how the universe began."[12] Hawking, a world-class physics instructor and theoretician, still has to use the creation story (God created heaven and earth) to explain his complex theories to a general public. Anderson exposes the rhetoric of Hawking's discussion.

Earlier in the performance, Anderson ruminated over Hawking's version of black holes in the teaching/information series of stories, saying "and you know Stephen Hawking has a theory about information and where it goes when it disappears . . . " In that story, the black hole becomes the locus of death, the place all information goes in the end.

However, Anderson shifts from this earlier rumination on information theory to actually becoming a visual representation of the black hole itself in the "Your Rang" piece through the variety-show-style manipulation of technology—the distortion of her image on the video and the use of a vocal filter. She becomes the place that all information (equated to "you") goes when it disappears (or dies). Though Stephen Hawking is not mentioned in "The Black Hole" as he is earlier, the parallel between the referential quanta ("black hole" and "disappear") in each story offers a connection between the content of the two pieces. This connection maintains the overall flow and experience of *Nerve Bible.* By creating the black hole entity in the "You Rang" piece, Anderson draws attention to the metanarrative (creation myth) Hawking uses in his book to legitimate his theories for the public.

Another subtle comment may be extracted in comparing "The Black Hole" and the earlier pieces. Via this comparison, Anderson seems to suggest that, though the content of Hawking's book may contain new information that we hunger for, Hawking's story is a very old one. At the same time Hawking offers us new material, he wraps it in old packaging. What is truth here? Who gets to decide? And how do they legitimate their truth? In Hawking's case, he uses religious creation mythology to legitimate his own theories of the beginnings of the universe. By pointing this out, Anderson exposes the processes by which information supports and perpetuates itself. Nor does she stand outside of this construction. By teaching her college students wrong information and testing them on it, she abused her authority. However Anderson calls attention to her own position of authority and questions it; Hawking does not.

Anderson has shifted from critiquing scientific metanarratives to critiquing religious metanarratives. In the case of Hawking, she has uncovered one scientist's use of religious metanarrative to legitimate—as well as communicate—his theories. If one considers that Science usurped the position of Religion as the dominant worldview and arbiter of Truth, this example of the intertwining of metanarratives may represent that usurpation. And the face of God presented by science, as Anderson represents him, is not a very friendly fellow. Anderson creates this commentary via the electronic manipulation of her presence during the performance.

Legitimizing Power: The World Wide Web

In another piece from *Nerve Bible*, "Microsoft and the Vatican," Anderson again addresses the issues of power, Truth, and information:

> (a series of indecipherable web page addresses is spit out by a male electronic voice over the speakers) . . . You know what I really like about cyberspace is the rumors. Like the recent so-called AP press release that the so-called Vatican had been bought out by Microsoft and a so-called Bishop responded: (electronically created "male" character) "We're thrilled. We've been using icons for over 2,000 years and Microsoft has only been doing it for three. So, think of the potential."

Anderson refers to an actual rumor floating around the internet regarding Microsoft's bid for the Vatican. A bit of the original "press release" follows:

> VATICAN CITY (AP) — In a joint press conference in St. Peter's Square this morning, MICROSOFT Corp. and the Vatican announced that the Redmond software giant will acquire the Roman Catholic Church in exchange for an unspecified number of shares of MICROSOFT common stock. If the deal goes through, it will be the first time a computer software company has acquired a major world religion.[13]

Whether or not this press release was actually sent on the AP wire is unknown. The news that circulated around the internet was supposedly copyrighted by an author, Hank Vorjes [Copyright © 1994 Knight-Ridder / Tribune Business News, Received via NewsEDGE from Desktop Data, Inc.: 03/07/94, 19:20]. Anderson does not seem to attempt to check on the source of the rumor. Her focus is on communication of the rumor.

Anderson couches the report as a "so-called" press release given by a "so-called" Bishop about a "so-called" Vatican. The phrase, "so-called," is a journalistic phrase which means that the information about to be imparted has not been completely confirmed. But Anderson is not concerned with the element of truth in the report but how the rumor is spread—in this case, how the "so-called" press release was packaged in a particular way so as to be accepted as legitimate enough for people to pass it around the World Wide Web. Anderson does not quote the original press release verbatim. However, she opts to create her own version of the rumor by creating the character of the Bishop and the response that the Vatican is "thrilled." Anderson highlights the idea that, through the paths of communication, the original story mutates far beyond the original.

Children often play the rumor game where one person whispers a secret in another's ear and the original message mutates as it passes from ear to ear. Anderson's creation of the Bishop's quote operates in much the same way. However, Anderson also seems to suggest, in the particular case of "Microsoft and the Vatican," that Americans seem to have no problem accepting a rumor about a merger between a large corporation and a major world religion. Because people on the internet passed on the rumor as truth, the mixture of religion and commerce seems to be held as an acknowledged fact. This acceptance implies that no distinction exists between religion and business.

Both religion and information technologies are represented as corporations but with different products. The Bishop character tries to bridge even this gap through his confusion of signs. The icons used by computers become the same as the icons used by the Roman Catholic church. Anderson has previously stated that she feels that "culture in this country has become incredibly corporate and that scares me, it really does."[14] Anderson shows us how corporate mentality has infiltrated a sacred institution, religion, which should supposedly be free of worldly desires. However, the Roman Catholic Church seems just as interested in corporate stock as any business man. The Bishop then becomes just another corporate vice-president under the Pope as CEO. Also, the computer then becomes a new form of Bible and the internet and World Wide Web become emerging new religions, complete with religious iconography. Bill Gates, head of the Microsoft Corporation, becomes a parallel to the Pope, if not somewhat deified.[15]

In the second part of "Microsoft and the Vatican," Anderson begins to create a large visual representation (video) of the means by which information and ideology are spread via media praxis. She begins with:

> But I like being on the internet because you can get weather reports from anywhere on the globe, find out where the big

> supertankers are, or whether there are any storms going on at the North Pole. And if you've got the right software, you can spin the world around and get off anywhere. As long as you've got the right numbers, the right codes. For example, hit return, hold down the option key, shift three times, slash, slash, dot-com, . . . Standbye.

A video of a lighted tunnel appears center stage, and the video camera begins to move down the tunnel. As the unintelligible sound of web addresses (URLs) comes from an electronic voice on audio tape with a background texture of other electronic sounds, a series of typed web addresses are superimposed over the video. As Anderson begins to speak of the Vatican, the video of the lighted tunnel disappears and is replaced with a background texture video of hundreds of neon strips of light shooting by quickly. The web addresses still flash on the video, superimposed over the background texture.

After Anderson transitions into speaking about the weather information available on the internet, a graphic of a web (like a spider's web) appears as the background video texture. The web addresses still flash over the video screens. Then Anderson fades out all of these images and into a video of male dancers in grass skirts which Anderson shot in 1980 during her trip to Ponape, a tiny island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.[16] The sound, now consisting of an underscore of doo-wop music, is drowned out by a large electric sound and the repeated phrase, "One world, one operating system." The images are broadcast on two large video screens which are placed center stage. The image of the dancers is continually shifting in color—color filters change the image from one color to another but always maintain primarily a monochromatic palette. This one image then changes to a split screen and then multiple screens within the two larger video screens. Large swipes pass over the image of the dancers, as well. The superimposed words, "One World, One Operating System" scroll over the images of the dancers. Then the words "Aloha!," followed by "Wish You Were Here!," are superimposed over the image of the dancers. A pair of animated bluebirds then appear and swirl over the changing images. The dancers suddenly disappear, and we see the empty performance space (a flat piece of ground in front of wind-blown palm trees) where they had been dancing.

All of these events are directed by Anderson, who is on stage watching the video images, her back to the audience, and directing the swipes and color changes with handheld flashlights similar to the ones airport personnel use when directing a plane out to the runway. Not only does Anderson focus on the mediation of the video images, but she also draws attention to herself as interpreter

and mediator of the images.[17] We are fully aware of her position in relation to the mediated images because she is physicalizing it.

Anderson is simultaneously part of the representation and authoring the representation. She becomes the concrete manifestation of how culture is interpreted and packaged ideologically, and she exposes the entire process to her audiences by trying physically to demonstrate how the process works. She is a subject-in-ideology making ideology. She waves the flashlights in her hands as she literally cues the technicians off stage to change the images she presents. She edits and controls what is seen. Anderson seems to ask what is being told, who is saying it, and, most importantly, what ideology is being transferred along with the information received. She asks who decides what is heard and seen and what gives those persons the authority to decide.

The repeated slogan, "one world, one operating system" has resonance in this context. It suggests that the mediation process Anderson is exposing crosses cultural boundaries to encompass the globe, not unlike Fredric Jameson's description of "multinational capitalism."[18] Anderson also seems to suggest that the corporate world is really the one in control of the global "operating system," for it is the Vatican who is playing the subordinate to Microsoft.

The Power of Religious Faith: Awaiting Death

In the piece called "My Grandmother's Hats," Anderson discusses the phenomenon of religion as a legitimizing agent and the religious metanarrative of death. As a preface to the following story, Anderson briefly describes her grandmother who had worked as a missionary and had traveled to Japan to warn the Japanese of Christ's return. Her grandmother had offered them Christian salvation in the face of impending death. Anderson picks up the story years later, telling of the day her grandmother died:

> She was still talking about the end of the world and I remember the day she died, she was very excited. She was sitting in her hospital room waiting to die and she was very excited. She was like a small bird perched on the edge of her bed near the window and she was wearing this pink nightgown and combing her hair so she would look pretty for the big moment when Christ came to get her. And she wasn't afraid but just at the last minute something happened that changed everything.
>
> After years of preaching and predicting the future, suddenly she panicked. Because she couldn't decide whether or not to wear a hat.

> And so when she died she went into the future in a rush, in a panic, with no idea of what would come next.

This story may focus on how life operates more on laws of chance than on more stable, knowable concepts. Anderson's grandmother was so certain all of her life of what would happen to her in the end. However, when the final moment came, she was plunged for the first time into a world of chance, chaos, and confusion.

However, sometimes, Anderson uses the video backdrops to comment upon her own performance construction, as in "My Grandmother's Hats." Here, Anderson uses a basic video background that could possibly be used for any song or monologue, floating feathers. The feathers create a lush color background for the performance piece, while the soft, upward movement of the feathers offers a certain aesthetic value. The feathers floating upward in the background may represent literal feathers from the hat that Anderson's grandmother couldn't decide whether to wear, the human soul (Anderson's grandmother's soul being transported to heaven), or an angel's wings in flight to the heavens.

However, when the *manner* in which the video is presented is analyzed, we see Anderson pointing out her own act of storytelling. The images of the moving feathers are altered half way through the piece. No longer do the feathers softly float up, but they become choppy in their movement. The video has become a series of stop-motion shots of the feathers. In the first, fluid part, Anderson seems to allow the audience to focus on the movement of the feathers. The video images help to maintain the movement (flow) from one segment to the other, which allows Anderson to transition from the grandmother-as-missionary to the story of her death. In the first part, Anderson's grandmother controls her life, and the feathers move in a fluid and predictable pattern. However, as Anderson's grandmother loses control in her life and faces an uncertain future, the video represents this loss of control by chopping the images into a random series of still shots. As Anderson's grandmother becomes confused and disoriented, the audience is presented with a series of confusing and disorienting video images.

Anderson shifts attention from a real moment in her life to the stage representation of that moment. She shifts away from merely telling a story to commenting upon the act of telling the story. Anderson seems to be focusing, not on the feathers as symbols, but on the process of videotaping the moving feathers.

Through the use of stop-motion images in the second part, Anderson historicizes her own life, as suggested by Auslander. Auslander argues that postmodern artists must historicize the contemporary "in the Brechtian sense of getting some distance on the world we live in and thus gaining a better understanding of it."[19] We see Anderson, the subject, objectively turning her life into a story and presenting that story as an objective examination of a subjective

life. She historicizes her life and represents it on stage as that of a subject-in-ideology, one affected by the whims of dominant ideology.

Anderson uses this Brechtian distance on her personal life for two reasons. First, she uses it to expose her own ideological position. Second, she uses the distance as a way of becoming more intimate with her audiences. Both work in tandem. As Anderson identifies her own ideological position, she places herself within the same system as the audience, creating an intimate common ground upon which the audience and she can stand.

If Anderson is to legitimate her own comments and concerns about American culture and society and offer her performances as a means of exposing dominant ideology, she must also question her own position within that culture. She must admit that she sits within this frame and not beyond some illusory boundary. How can she question her own involvement? Can she get any true objective distance on her self? Anderson uses first person narrative throughout *Nerve Bible*. She doesn't seem even to attempt objectivity; the insights and observation in the show are purely subjective. Anderson's use of the first person narrative may suggest that she doesn't believe she can gain true distance from herself. How can she question her own involvement in American dominant power structures? Maybe Anderson can only remind her audience that her insights and observations are her response to social phenomena. She reminds her audience by drawing attention to the construction of her performances, how she puts them together. In the case of "My Grandmother's Hats," she reminds the audience that the story is told from her perspective by foregrounding the act of storytelling through the video of the feathers. As she exposes her process, audience members are then allowed to analyze for themselves what ideological position (e.g., moderate or liberal religious beliefs) is being furthered by Anderson's performances.

As Anderson exposes her own process, the audience can more easily identify with her. In "My Grandmother's Hats," Anderson steps back from the death of her grandmother as if to say, is it ironic that this lady was in control all of her life and, in the very last moments of that life, she lost all control? In distancing herself from her grandmother's story, Anderson draws the audience into her confidence by pointing out the irony. Whether audience members have known fundamentalist Christians like Anderson's grandmother or not, most can relate to and identify with the desire for control of their own destinies.

In Anderson's story, the irony derives from the fact that, though we desire control over our lives and our destinies, this control is an illusion (metanarrative). Anderson's grandmother was never really able to know her future (her destiny); her grandmother had bought into the Christian belief in knowing what the future held for her (a place in heaven). The metanarrative here (Christian belief in a

certain future/secure death) was the grandmother's undoing. After years of knowing exactly what would happen at the moment of her death (she would be welcomed into heaven), she realized she really didn't know what would happen when the moment actually arrived (which hat would make her more acceptable to the keeper of heaven's gate).

Once Anderson points out this irony, we understand that Anderson, too, has the same desire for control over her life and destiny (another part of Anderson's ideological position). She recognized this desire in her grandmother because it is also a part of her own makeup. Anderson finds the story of her grandmother's death just as ironic as we do. We can also identify with Anderson if we are aware (or become aware) of our own desires for control of our destinies like Anderson and her grandmother.

In "My Grandmother's Hats," Anderson tells the story of her grandmother's death, makes the audience aware of how she's telling the story through the video, exposes her own position within the story and creates a means of identification between herself and the audience. In this process, Anderson has exposed the metanarratives of the certain afterlife and absolute free will, and her (and our) desire for such metanarratives. As Donna Haraway has suggested in her "Manifesto for Cyborgs," Anderson has created a union between performer and perceiver through the destabilizing effect of technology.[20]

Anderson closes the show with a continuing call for the questioning of American ideologies. She says in the last lines of *Nerve Bible*, "because history is stories that we half remember. And most of them never even get written down. So, when they say things like, we're going to do this by the book, you have to ask, what book?" Laurie Anderson offers these examinations of the perpetuation of American ideology within a familiar form, the TV variety show. But she has made the familiar strange. She has inserted serious and challenging subject matter into the TV variety show form. She has placed what Raymond Williams has described as TV flow in a dark theatre. In the process, she offers us a glimpse of our identity as Americans and as individuals through our ideological practices.

Notes

1. *The Green Room*. Produced by Craig Martin. KPFA, Berkeley. 15 Jan. 1995.

2. Rosemarie Bank. "The Doubled Subject and the New Playwrights Theatre," *Critical Theory and Performance*, Eds. Janelle Reinelt and Joseph Roach. (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P) 324.

3. Philip Auslander, *Presence and Resistance: Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance*, (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992) 25.

4. Herman Rappaport, "Can You Say Hello? Laurie Anderson's *United States*." *Theatre Journal* 38:3 (1986): 348.

5. Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. (Hanover: Wesleyan U P, 1974) 80.

6. Though a reading of each discrete unit may provide a certain understanding of the program, such a reading misses the experience or the contextualization of that program within television flow, according to Williams. The flow of information and media representations constitutes the central television experience. Therefore, a reading of a television program cannot be derived from just the contents (specific words and images) of that program but also from the other information provided around that program (newsbreaks, station IDs, or other programs) or the interruptions during it (commercials).

7. Rick Altman, "Television/Sound." *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture,* ed. Tania Modleski, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana U P, 1986) 40.

8. I have noticed a curious phenomenon, though. When people rent films on video, they will often turn off all of the lights and attempt to simulate a movie house atmosphere. The current success of "home theatre systems," sound systems which mimic what you would hear at the movies, is testament to this phenomenon. This simulation is an attempt to focus on the one discrete unit (the entire movie) and is possibly a personal attempt at subverting household flow.

9. Laurie Anderson, *Stories from the Nerve Bible.* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994) 6.

10. Williams 90.

11. Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes*, (New York: Bantam, 1988) x.

12. 173.

13. Jim. Davies, HomePage of the Brave. World Wide Web URL: http://www.c3.lanl.gov:8080/cgi/jimmyd/quoter?home.

14. Martin.

15. Once again, Anderson shows Science (technology) usurping the religious metanarrative (represented in the form of "icons") in order to legitimate itself, like in the earlier "Black Hole" piece.

16. Anderson 75.

17. With the specifically Western (or essentially American) musical style of the doo-wop beat, all of the images are not only filtered through a mediating process but through a distinctly American mediating process.

18. Jameson xviii.

19. Auslander 6.

20. Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s." *Feminism/Postmodernism,* ed. Linda J. Nicholson, (New York: Routledge 1990) 192.