

“A Sinister Resonance”: Joseph Conrad’s Malay Ear and Auditory Cultural Studies

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Blog post published July 9, 2015 in *Sounding Out!*

<https://doi.org/10.59350/hbrch-q6576>

Abstract

Welcome to the first part of Sonic Shadows, a new SO! series featuring essays drawn from a recent symposium on the question “what does it mean to have a voice” held last April at The New School, and featuring organizers Dominic Pettman, Pooja Rangan and Julie Beth Napolin, as well as invitees Mara Mills (NYU), [...]

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Cultural Studies, Ethnographic, Language, Literature

Recommended citation

napolinjb. (2015, July 9). “A Sinister Resonance”: Joseph Conrad’s Malay Ear and Auditory Cultural Studies. *Sounding Out!*. <https://doi.org/10.59350/hbrch-q6576>

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Welcome to the first part of **Sonic Shadows**, a new *SO!* series featuring essays drawn from a recent symposium on the question “what does it mean to have a voice” held last April at The New School, and featuring organizers Dominic Pettman, Pooja Rangan and Julie Beth Napolin, as well as invitees Mara Mills (NYU), Gustavus Stadler (Haverford), Rey Chow (Duke), and James Steintrager (UC Irvine). I am happy to serve as Guest Editor, bringing some work developed for, during and after that event, beginning with my own article below.

Participants in “[Sonic Shadows](#)” focused on the voice’s shadowy or coded qualities as it stands on the border of the animal, human, and machine. Our motivating question was one shared by literary studies (authorship, the voice of writing, narration), technology studies (recording, storing, and transmitting voices), and media studies, particularly documentary studies (giving voice and objectivity). This question of having a voice, among the oldest questions of philosophy and literature, is also at the intersection of musicality, ontology, epistemology, phenomenology, psychoanalysis and history. Our discussions aimed to carve out a new trajectory for voice studies today, and in this series for *Sounding Out!* our authors will begin to lay out where that trajectory might lead.

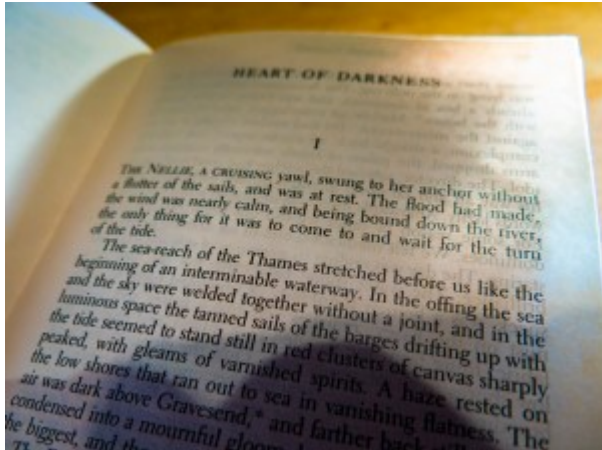
— Guest Editor Julie Beth Napolin

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As readers of this blog are well aware, historically, sound has been the “other” to more ensconced objects of music and voice. [Brian Kane’s *Sound Unseen*](#) has recently urged for an auditory cultural studies that might move us away from a reified category of sound: “Although it seems a truism to even say it, music studies is a species of sound studies and auditory culture” (226). By this same token, “voice” does not merely become “sound” at its limit, when words fray or dissolve, but rather begins that way. More importantly, auditory cultural studies would (and does) revolve around modes of listening, which are necessarily grounded in questions—and the always open question—of difference and the social. With that in mind, this article argues for the central role of the novel—and the voice in and of the novel—in an auditory cultural studies.

Poetry has enjoyed a longstanding [dialogue around sonorousness](#), while the novel seems more immune to questions of the auditory. In “The Storyteller,” Walter Benjamin called the novel “the birthplace of the solitary individual,” meaning that writing and reading happen in silence, without a listening other. We don’t “listen” to the novel in the same way we might listen to poetry, which often demands that we read it aloud. But if the novel is, in its most basic sense, a combination of description and dialogue, then the human speaking voice—and how to represent it—is central to its definition, as well as how to represent sounds in the world. William Faulkner describes “the Chuck. Chuck. Chuck.” of an adze in *As I Lay Dying*, and novelists like Zora Neale Hurston wrote in

an “eye-dialect” that would try to approximate for the eye the sounds of African American vernacular voice, as did Charles Dickens with English vernacular—each of these practices tell us about the unstable relationship between writing and listening. The novel has always been haunted by this gap, and it tells us important things about what we think it means to communicate across distance.



“2015-03-18 adrift” by Flickr user Robert Couse-Baker, CC BY 2.0

The modernist novel in particular is a fecund territory for modes of listening, and such works as [Mark Goble’s *Beautiful Circuits*](#) have shown to what extent auditory practices shaped by technology had conditioned writing practices and its imaginary in the long 20th century. But the question of “having a voice,” still lingers, even after [Friedrich Kittler](#) has shown to what extent the writer felt robbed of and haunted by voice in the wake of the invention of the gramophone in the late 19th century. Was the experience of voice in “modernity” only its disembodiment? And doesn’t the emphasis upon disembodiment obscure the place of the body in the signifying social practices of auditory culture? Is reading a wholly disembodied or silent experience?

In [a recent essay](#) on Joseph Conrad, I addressed these questions, pointing out that the history of the novel, as a “silent” genre, feels quite different if we begin with Conrad’s physical voice as mediated by his vexed relationship to the English language. He had spent his childhood in exile in Russia and his adult life as a merchant marine, steeped in colonial locations. Conrad would only ever write fiction in English, his third language after Polish and French, and he learned English by overhearing it aboard ships, never shedding a foreign accent he once described as “gibberish.” His sentiment in a letter to confidant, “*l’Anglais m’est toujours une langue étrangère*,” registers a double displacement from a home in written and spoken language.

Conrad once wrote that the “power of sound has always been greater than the power of sense.” Often in his novels, characters hear when they cannot see, and “action,” is reduced to characters’ listening to distant sounds—like the drumming that comes from the jungle in *Heart of Darkness*. Dialogue is rarely a simple matter of transcribing words on the page. He tried to represent the fact that people often mishear each other or stutter and shout in the midst of noise—those representations changed what was possible for “dialogue” in the process. I’m reminded here of

how in several of Jean Luc Godard’s films, viewers can’t hear what characters are saying because the noise in a café is too loud, or a train passes by at a crucial moment. These issues of communication in the novel are especially important for auditory cultural studies to ponder—the inner voice of writing and reading, the voice that is supposed to make the most immediate sense to a person, is suddenly hijacked by sounds.



“Joseph Conrad” by Flickr user Dan Strange, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Conrad would never speak English without a sense of shame, his own wife often couldn’t understand him, and his prose is marked by oddities that reveal thinking in one language while writing in another. In *The Secret Agent*, Steven G. Kellman briefly [notes](#), Conrad writes the phrase “pulled up violently the venetian blind,” an error in word order that carries what Kellman calls “the traces of incomplete translanguaging” (11). I’m also thinking of the unidiomatic word “moonshine” in the opening paragraphs of *Heart of Darkness*. Moments like this are important because they betray the extent to which Conrad was “passing” in his voice as an English writer.

Heart of Darkness is nothing if not a series of voices and sounds. It begins with an English merchant ship waiting for the turn of the tide and to dock in London. To pass the time, Marlow, a sailor aboard ship, tells an extended story of a previous journey along the Congo River (as reported by Marlow’s anonymous listener in the present). This story is rife with misheard voices and distant sounds. [Chinua Achebe](#) seminally attacked Conrad’s racism in his representation of African people as being without voice, as only making noise and speaking broken English. But this reading is complicated by Conrad’s own struggle with English. We have to hear “behind” or “through” his claim to speaking as an Englishman via the voice of Marlow. Conrad also crafted scenes where Englishmen have to confront being baffled by difference—they have to sit and listen, and confess they don’t understand the meanings of sounds.

The development of Marlow, Conrad’s recurring English avatar, was tied up in the desire for an idealized English voice. His relationship to English continually mediated his ambivalent feelings about the act of writing, his place in English literary society, and what it meant to speak—physically and symbolically—as a naturalized citizen. These ambivalences, I describe, all collide in the moment of Conrad’s first encounter with the x-ray and the phonograph in 1898 when he will discover that “all matter” is simply waves and vibrations. Though Conrad is most remembered for writing that the task of the novel is “to make you *see*”, auditory cultural studies would do well to remember that with *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad felt he had struck upon a novel with “a *sinister resonance*, a tonality of its own, a continued vibration that, I hoped, *would hang* in the air and dwell on the ear long after the last note had been struck.”



“Heart of darkness” by Flickr user Egui, CC BY-NC 2.0

Heart of Darkness is preoccupied with what I call the “vibrational monad,” as a theory of the continuity of all things and actions. Vibration—as action at a distance—allowed Conrad to imagine the novel as a material force overcoming of national and linguistic difference. As a sound-effect that reached others without speech, vibration for Conrad dissolved the difficulties of embodied communication. The drumming of the Congo is one such resonance, but so are moments like “moonshine.” These resonances remain “sinister,” though, because communication is not absolute or guaranteed. Conrad also wanted his readers to experience an emotional pall of the horrors of colonialism, communicated best not in words or “sense” but by the way obscure sounds and nonsense linger and haunt the reader’s inner ear after putting down the novel.

In my essay, I do not distinguish greatly between vibration and resonance in their material differences. In Conrad’s imaginary these forces are intertwined, and that intertwining—in the nature of the literary in its turn of phrases—marks a place for literature in auditory cultural studies. It is difficult to distinguish these tropes in his writing partly because they pose an emotional and physical tie; both link body to body. Historically, electronic technologies of vibration involve a colonizing impulse to conquer space and time. But in Conrad, vibration remains uncertain and ambiguous in that it often reverses its course to become its opposite and *separate* bodies as a means of distance and difference.

In his early fictions, vibration and resonance register translingual fault lines, reminding us that Conrad’s acquisition of voice was an embodied process, an uneven and ongoing one. Conrad begins his first novel *Almayer’s Folly* with a vocal fragment, a shout in two languages, neither of them English. These two words would have appeared strange and completely unfamiliar to his readers in England: “Kaspar, makan!” As we only later learn, this unidentified shout to Kaspar Almayer, a Dutch trader, has been issued by his Sulu wife who calls him to dinner.



“Joseph Conrad drawing and books”
by Flickr user Ben Sutherland, CC BY
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What does Conrad’s Malay voice mean for the definition of Anglophone modernism (from James Joyce to Jean Rhys) and what “other” voices and sounds define it from within? It is significant that Conrad’s 1895 romance does not begin with any description of characters or even the world. In this Victorian moment, a reader would expect fiction to begin with some sort of utterance in close proximity to authorial speech, as a *voice-over* (in the first or third person) that overlays the world of the novel. This voice tells us who we are about to meet and where, grants access. This shout is a puzzling beginning for a writer who would worry so much about reaching his readers. We—readers in English—don’t know what this voice is saying. No reader knows where this voice is coming from, who is shouting, and where. It won’t be translated for several pages, and then only indirectly. Again, Conrad hijacks the inner voice of reading to trouble English self-certainty.

That reminds me of the critique of voice-over and translation in the writings and films of [Trinh T. Minh-ha](#), who often forces her viewers to confront languages they cannot understand and to sit with that non-understanding. Conrad gives up that authorial impulse; he drops its armature to become another voice—of a woman and colonized subject captured and brokered—as the opening gesture of his fiction. He speaks in her voice—rather than for her—and lets it take over what should be the first, authorial utterance. The shout carries an unspoken agony of colonization. She was, we later learn, kidnapped by Captain Lingard in the seizure of her village, and while he will

call her “daughter,” she must endure his nightly visits, only to be passed to Almayer along with the failed promise of material wealth. His “folly” is inherent to the colonial rage for identity. This first authorial utterance is marred by the audible specter of sexual violence in colonialism.

What does this specter mean for the place of the novel in auditory cultural studies? Conrad destabilizes the white reader’s claim to “encountering” a world at a distance through the inner voice, a voice that is supposedly spontaneous, close and natural. The novel is also a technology of voices, but in this case, rather than bringing the other close, these vocal fragments mark an important place for distance. Conrad wrote *Almayer’s Folly* during his last journey as a merchant marine. Remarkably, one of few drafts of a letter home from that trip in Polish survives on a verso page of the manuscript. That material manuscript is too a space of difference—voices within voices, languages within languages, voices recorded but also obscured. The “sinister resonance” is one name for this founding disparity in the novel as an act of communication.

Julie Beth Napolin is Assistant Professor of Literary Studies at The New School, a musician, and radio producer. She received a PhD in Rhetoric from the University of California, Berkeley. Her work participates in the fields of sound studies, literary modernism and aesthetic philosophy, asking what practices and philosophies of listening can tell us about the novel as form. She served as Associate Editor of *Digital Yoknapatawpha* and is writing a book manuscript on listening, race, and memory in the works of Conrad, Du Bois, and Faulkner titled *The Fact of Resonance*. Her work has appeared in *qui parle*, *Fifty Years After Faulkner* (ed. Jay Watson and Ann Abadie), and *Vibratory Modernism* (ed. Shelley Trower and Anthony Enns).

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