SABINE KIM

Acoustic Entanglements

Sound and Aesthetic Practice

American Studies ★ A Monograph Series

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For Elisabeth

Table of Contents

Table of Figures

P. 137 Fig. 7: Rebecca Belmore. *Ayumee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to Their Mother*. Performance and installation. Various locations: 1991 to present. Photograph © Rebecca Belmore. Walter Pillips Gallery, Banff Centre. Web.

P. 140 Fig. 8: Robert J. Flaherty, dir. *Nanook of the North*. Film. 1922. Criterion Collection, 1999. Screenshot.

P. 149 Fig. 9: William Forsythe. *Human Writes.* 2005. Choreography. Photograph (c) by Dominik Mentzos. *Parole. The Body of the Voice/Stimmkörper*. Ed. Annette Stahmer. Cologne: Salon, 2009. 87.

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variously generous, supportive, doubting, critical questions and suggestions. In particular, Mashav Balsam's willingness to discuss early stages of this book has left me with an intellectual debt which would need many more books to repay. Joel Anderson's impromptu self-fashioned *derive* through night-time London provided invaluable "research material" when I later came to undertake one of Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's audio walks through that same city.

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1 Introduction: Sound that Moves

In the spring of 1849, in the midst of heightened debates on slavery, a packing crate bound with five hickory hoops and measuring two feet wide by two and three-quarter feet deep and three feet long was delivered by express from Richmond, Virginia, to Philadelphia and into the hands of abolitionists William Still and James Miller McKim. According to the eyewitness account published in Still's *The Underground Rail Road* (1872), the crate was immediately taken into a back room where, after barring the doors, McKim rapped on the crate, at the same time uttering "All right," to which a voice emerged from the box calling out a greeting in return. Sawing off the hoops and prising open the crate revealed the man who had arranged his own transport and had thus travelled out of slavery. Henry "Box" Brown rose up from the cramped container and proceeded to sing a Hymn of Thanksgiving adapted from Psalm 40, "I waited patiently for the Lord, and He heard my prayer" (Still 70; Fig. 1).

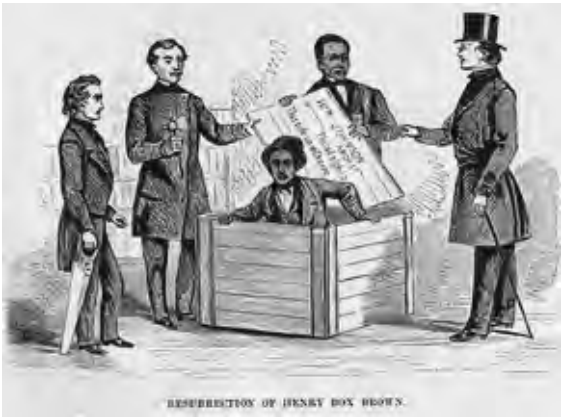

Fig. 1: Henry "Box" Brown's "Resurrection," as published in Still's book; engraving by John Osler (1872)

Although the focus of my study is more broadly on sound and the associated cultural practices of hearing/listening, rather than on music and song as such, the performative aspects of Henry Box Brown's singing a modified psalm to mark his resourceful escape from lifelong slavery in one of the cruellest slave states of the South function as a way to theorize sound as something which "moves" in various ways: from its (sometimes occluded) source to the (sometimes unwilling) listener, from one state (slavery/Virginia) to another (freedom/Pennsylvania), and—last but not least—in the production of affect.

Firstly, as Still's narrative suggests, the song marks a transition between states, thus performatively bringing into being the very condition which it praises: deliverance.

Secondly, the extreme confinement of the packing crate is juxtaposed with the demarcated horizon of sound; the threat of death-in-life which is the condition of slavery is transformed into the miracle of life-in-the-face-of-death.

Thirdly, emerging into an expectant room in the free North, Brown acknowledged his awareness of the politicizing potential of his escape, once it became publicized via the Abolitionist papers, through his careful choice of song, modified from psalm and spiritual for the occasion. As Still writes, "he remarked that, before leaving Richmond he had selected for his arrival hymn (if he lived) the Psalm [...] And most touchingly did he sing the psalm, much to his own relief, as well as to the delight of his small audience" (70). In the analysis of Daphne Brooks, "Brown arrived singing in an antislavery world very much accustomed to yoking sacred song with political resistance" (117). The song thus, as Brooks maintains, "articulates and constitutes the movement from putative 'thinghood' into personhood" (117), and draws on a tradition of enslaved persons refashioning sacred song to mirror the creation of

> a new world by transcending the narrow confines of the one in which they were forced to live. They extended the boundaries of their restrictive universe backward until it fused with the world of the Old Testament, and upward until it became one with the world beyond … [T]hey creat[ed] an expanded universe, by literally willing themselves reborn. (Lawrence Levine qtd. in Brooks 117)

It is no coincidence that Brown chose a hymn to mediate his spectacular emergence from the impossibly small box, the performance itself a referent for the otherwise elusive truth of slavery life. The boundary-crossing characteristic of song is manifested in its role as a vehicle of cultural memory in the diaspora, as Paul Gilroy has asserted in *The Black Atlantic* and as I argue in my chapter on the transnational routes of dub poetry, where I draw on Gilroy to extend his conceptualization to include Canada within a black transatlantic cultural space. An important cultural context is the shattering experience of the Middle Passage, during which slave traders attempted to strip away props of identity such as African languages and cultural practices and in the face of which modes of performance and cultural communication evolved and transformed themselves (Walcott, "Memory and Lived Experience"). Sound—on the one hand so slight and ephemeral and on the other hand ineradicable insofar that it is ultimately transportable and exceedingly flexible—takes on a crucial role in the work of cultural memory and mourning.

This book suggests that through investigating concepts of acoustic perception as well as their relationship to the visual, the study of poetry and performance can be significantly enriched. In recent years, the study of sound has been slowly gaining momentum in American Studies, as witnessed—for instance—by *Mosaic*'s two-part special issue on sound in 2009, and an *American Quarterly* special issue, edited by Kara Keeling and Josh Kun in 2011. However, most of the contributions in these issues turn to sound and—more often—music and speech as it is either used or represented in film, on records, in literature and on the stage. Expanding on such work on the one hand, and the more technologically informed field of sound studies on the other hand (see, e.g., Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey B. Pingree), this book attempts to "entangle," as it were, media history and literary history. More specifically, and linking the different case studies of my analysis, I am proposing four arguments about the role of sound in reading literature and performance, concerning the "acoustic" entanglement of 1) media history and literary history, 2) embodied perception and aesthetic practice, 3) aesthetic practice and media protocol, and 4) the politics of stratification:

First, I argue that media history can productively be read alongside literary history because the materiality of media themselves, such as Henry Box Brown's box, influence the ways in which we experience

literature and acts of reading. While my study is partly influenced by the work of German media scholar Friedrich Kittler who—critically engaging with and radicalizing McLuhan—sees media as generative of their content and "determin[ing] our situation" as such (*Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* xxxix), I argue against the view that media are wholly deterministic.[1] Instead, media themselves are materializations of particular cultural tendencies. In this sense, Emily Dickinson's writing and poetic practice at large are not necessarily determined by the new media forms of the nineteenth century but rather rehearse the same constitution of a new techno-logic as those media.

Second, sound and other embodied perceptions are often deeply implicated in what we, in post-Enlightenment culture, tend to think of as exclusively visual and/or textual practices. Throughout the study, I thus look at the relationship between writing/performing manifested, for example, in Dickinson's fascicles as well as the enclosures of her poem–letters (such as, famously, a cricket's exoskeleton) which I discuss in Chapter 2. In the next chapter on Lillian Allen's dub poetry, I focus on the creation of public space through the live concert situation and Allen's decision to publish her poetry first as dub records with musical backing; analysis of embodied perception is especially important in Chapter 4, in looking at Cardiff and Miller's audio walks, which are meant to be perceived while on the move. In Chapter 5, as well, the acoustic dimension serves as a hinge between artist and audience both in Rebecca Belmore's performance art and the Forsythe Company's choreographies.

Third, poetry and other aesthetic performance practices themselves form a kind of media apparatus in that specificities of historical time and space are stored in the aesthetic forms themselves and can be reactivated when re-distributed; sound recording media themselves have a spectral quality, something which I am conceptualizing as a "phonographic logic." Thus, a reference to the strumming of a guitar string in Lillian Allen's "Revolution from de Beat" can be charged with the history of the Middle Passage, while the division of senses in Cardiff and

[1] For a criticism of Kittler and the Kittler-inspired German school of media theory see Sybille Krämer, who argues for a "performative" conceptualization of media that neither imbues them with historical apriority nor ignores their influence on what is transmitted (20-39).

Miller's walks explicitly relates to what Jonathan Crary has described as suspension of perception for the late nineteenth century. *Fourth, at the same time, the overlapping of old sounds in new places (poetry in the so-called New World), or conversely the dissemination of new sounds in old places (dub poetry in the Caribbean), can bring to light the stratified nature of cultural space itself in a politicizing effect.*

In this book, I discuss primary texts which, at first glance, seem to be very different from one another: the poetry of Emily Dickinson, the dance performances of the Forsythe Company, the audio walks of Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, the dub poetry of Lillian Allen and the performance art of Rebecca Belmore. Moreover, I will address texts drawn from a US-American context as well as a Canadian one; each of these national frameworks, however, is strongly embedded in transnational and diasporic contexts, which are particularly evident with regard to dub poetry in Chapter 3.

Following Rey Chow's use of the term "entanglement" as a figure not only for "things held together or laid over one another in nearness and likeness" (as in a material knot), but also "for meetings that are not necessarily defined by proximity or affinity" (*Entanglements* 1-2), I understand sound—"moving" in the senses described above—as a primary facilitator for such entanglements. Being at the same time related to sites (of enunciation and reception) and "floating" freely between them, sound, like Chow's "entanglement," destabilizes the "once-presumed stable categories of origination and causation" (*Entanglements* 10), while remaining linked to a non-causal network of affective ties "from which one cannot extricate oneself" (*Entanglements* 11).[2] In addition, through processes of recording and recalling, "acoustic entanglements" not only interlink spaces but also different layers of time. Thus, my case studies are entangled temporally—one instance being the sound works of Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller discussed in Chapter 4, which relate to the media technologies prefigured by Dickinson—and also stage "acoustic entanglements" of space: examining

[2] Chow's use of the term is inspired by quantum physics, where "entanglement" designates "mysterious connections between particles, which are said to be entangled due to simultaneous reactions they produce, reactions that are not the results of proximity" (*Entanglements* 2 fn 2).

crossovers and connections between the material and the immaterial in Dickinson and Spiritualism, between Canada and the Caribbean in Lillian Allen, between the "New World" and the "Old" in Cardiff/Miller, and between the indigenous history of the Americas and their "discovery" and "exploration" in Rebecca Belmore. In this sense, "acoustic entanglements" are not concerned solely with sound, but expose sound as being "enmeshed in various political, social, cultural, and economic discourses" (Paige 64).[3]

In my first main chapter, "Spirited Media, Aural Excesses," which relates mourning practices and new media technologies of sound recording in the nineteenth-century America, I look at Emily Dickinson and the phonograph. An American poet in whose work death looms large, Dickinson fashions a poetics that asserts the radical communicative possibilities of poetry in a time of the emergence of Spiritualism, intense debates over slavery and the rise of new technologies such as the telegraph, telephone and phonograph.

If Dickinson's poetics anticipate the recording and "remembering" properties of the phonograph as a means of mourning, Lillian Allen's poetics articulate the work of mourning in relation to the Middle Passage and the suppression of transatlantic cultural memory. In my third chapter, "(Re)Mixing Histories: Lillian Allen and the Routes of Dub Poetry," I examine Allen's dub poetry as a form of mediating network connecting the transatlantic space of the Caribbean, Britain, the African continent and Canada, where Allen is based.

The entanglement of "New World" and "Old World" is a subject I continue to explore in the next chapter, "Subjects of Hearing, Subject to History," where I turn to the work of Canadian sound artists Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller. Their collaborative audio walks as well as Cardiff's Internet project *Eyes of Laura* self-consciously reference a media history with roots in the nineteenth century's emergent technologies of perception. In *Walk Münster*, *Louisiana Walk*, and *A Large Slow River*, Cardiff and Miller create narratives in which time and space, the orienting coordinates of Kantian subjectivity par excellence, become

[3] In an article on folk music in Indian Naiyânti mêlam performance, Aaron Paige uses the term "acoustic entanglement" in this sense, drawing on the work of Jocelyne Guilbault (who talks of "audible" rather than "acoustic" entanglement).