Jessica E. Teague, *Sound Recording Technology and American Literature: From the Phonograph to the Remix*

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**Been Listening**

There is, by now, plenty of firm evidence that sound studies is a thing that scholars of the humanities, in general, can think of themselves as doing. The field has a Handbook, a Reader and a Companion, waiting as the willing greeters to a growing bibliography. There’s also a journal under the wing of a major publisher, and last, but not least, a roster of conferences large enough to rack up an environmentally-dubious number of air miles. But lurking at the back of these conferences, or in Zoom rooms, are literary scholars wondering if they’re quite where they’re supposed to be, or if there has, in fact, been a minor mistake in programming. After all, books don’t, by and large, make much noise. I’ve sat and listened rapt to presentations on underwater microphones, vintage drum machines and the social history of foghorns, only to look down at the poem I plan to start my own paper by reading, and finding it to be, by comparison, very quiet. Certainly, when I read the poem out it will become sounded, but that’s me making the sound, not the poem. I worry that I am an impostor, undeserving of this free conference stationery. But then comes the third measure of plastic-cupped coffee, and with it the thought that literary researchers have been doing something like sound studies for a lot longer than it was called that. When we talk about the unsettling effect of Marianne Moore rhyming “of” with “love,” we are, surely, studying sound, and the
way it acts on us. So too when we ask whether an Emily Dickinson poem is meant to sound like a hymn, or when we dig down into a Joycean pun. We might not have been squaring up to the ontology of sound itself, or even have been adequately willing to problematise our audile techniques, but we have, at least, been listening.

2 Listen well enough, Jessica E. Teague argues in her new book, *Sound Recording Technology and American Literature* (2021), and we’ll realise that many of the texts to which we listen are, themselves, listening to and asking questions of their sounded environments. Over five chapters and a postscript, Teague makes a strong case for literature after modernism as a key interlocutor for, and provocation of, the development of new sound technologies and new ways of thinking about their use. She takes a Jonathan Sternean stance on technological determinism from the get go, explaining that “while literary innovations were certainly shaped by phonographic technologies, writers have often led the way in imagining new uses for sound technologies, and their texts have played a key role in tutoring the ear to listen within a modern multimedia environment” (Teague 3). The book takes an unflinching approach to its premise, structuring its chapters around individual technologies and methods: the phonograph, the recorded book, magnetic tape, stereo playback, and remixing. These devices and deviations lead the way, with their corresponding authors following eagerly behind. The authors treated to extended commentary are John Dos Passos, Jelly Roll Morton, Sidney Bechet, William S. Boroughs, Langston Hughes, Amiri Baraka, Kevin Young and Chuck Palahniuk. For each writer (although that is a word which seems less than sufficient by the book’s end) Teague reveals how their work not only showed an awareness of new technologies, but used the specifics of literary form to interrogate these technologies’ potential affordances and constraints—their uses and misuses. This structure bears some likeness to another recent entry to the canon of literary listening: Edward Allen’s *Modernist Invention: Media Technology and American Poetry* (2020). Allen, too, pairs up authors with gadgets. We eavesdrop on Robert Frost and the telephone, and tune in to Wallace Stevens and the radio. But where Allen performs something of a controlled experiment with a single literary form—poetry—Teague takes the wide view, dropping in at key moments in sound technology’s busy twentieth century, and making a case for a continued engagement across different forms. This is, in a way, a trickier challenge. Whether or not we should, it’s not difficult to think of poetry, and especially the lyric poetry which is Allen’s focus, as a sounded medium. I personally count it as a success if a student describes Wallace Stevens’s poems, for example, as *noisy*. Prose fiction and memoir, on the other hand, seem more happy to remain on the page, without sound making up much of the equation.

3 This is where Teague’s ace-in-the-hole comes in. She coins the term “resonant reading,” to describe how she will carry out her “most important intervention”: the insistence that “twentieth-century American literature often theorizes listening, offering its readers new ways to hear” (15). We will only get towards that listening by *reading*, but reading as an “extended technique,” whereby we “blend the strategies of actual listening (whether to speech, to music, or to our acoustic environment) with an ear-oriented approach to reading texts” (16). It’s an exciting argument, and one which produces fine results, as I will outline below. But I haven’t quite managed to think my way to a full understanding of why Teague needs a new term for what is, as far as I can see, an iteration of something we already have to hand. As Teague admits, “the practice of resonant reading is not a challenge to or critique of close reading” (16, my emphases).
I was left wondering why the book settled on this polite coexistence, instead of simply declaring that resonant reading is a kind of close reading. This might seem like a nit-pick, but I think it’s important to avoid over-stratifying our techniques. The reading practices which Teague designates as resonant—chiefly, “the imagination of sound and the position of listening, even when the sounds themselves are silent” (18)—are key to successful close readings. The extent to which a text embraces or demurs from being sounded is an essential and evergreen point of enquiry, as is the question of what other media forms the text is thinking about. So really, I could flip this criticism on its head, and ask why we’re referring to and teaching a thing called close reading, when we could be calling it resonant, with potentially better results. Teague’s account of resonance is rich, honing in on its vibratory sense, its reaching across. It’s a word which works hard, and could, I think, make for some very good readers and readings.

It’s certainly a tool which dances in Teague’s hands. Each chapter makes a sparkling case for the mutual interference between technology and text. To begin, she reveals John Dos Passos as a skilled listener, riding the wave of developments in microphone technology within his USA trilogy. A particular thrill in this chapter is Teague’s work with dialect writing: a thorny issue which it can be tempting to swerve altogether. Teague shows Dos Passos’s dialect moving from overcooked phonetics to a deft attention to style and tone, in a parallel with a shift in recording practice from limited acoustic accuracy to rich electric fidelity. In the second chapter, Jelly Roll Morton and Sidney Bechet take center stage, with smaller parts played by Alan Lomax and Zora Neale Hurston. In interrogating the difference between an oral history and the “recorded books” of Morton and Bechet, Teague fleshes out her concept of resonant reading to include a kind of listening to listening required by the reader. In chapter three, magnetic tape comes onto the scene, and Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs are there to experiment with it as a “mode of composition” (26). Chapter four uses stereo recording to think about “space” within the poems of Langston Hughes and Amiri Baraka. Twin channel playback becomes a way into poems which ask their readers to do two things at once, like challenge a violent present and imagine a utopian future. The final chapter takes on “contemporary remix culture,” as manifested in the poems of Kevin Young and the novels of Chuck Palahniuk. Teague argues that remix has always had a “textual bent,” and that its logics were worked out on the page long before digital samplers became ubiquitous. A “postelectric postscript” rounds things off, featuring Anne Washburn’s Mr. Burns: A Postelectric Play (2012), and a concluding remark on the potential futures of playful interference between auditory and textual modes.

This is not quite a book of two halves, but Teague’s material works hardest for her in the first three chapters. Resonant reading does need to be close reading, if it’s going to avoid being overly-metaphorical in its findings. This problem is nowhere to be seen in Teague’s work on Jelly Roll Morton, for example, which places a transcript of the vinyl recording next to passages from the edited book, and skilfully elucidates the difference. An equivalent manoeuvre with a salvaged snatch of tape from Kerouac’s recorded conversation with Neal Cassidy is just as successful (this is also an instance of the superb archival work on offer in the book; it would have stood without it, but Teague makes her finds shine). In the chapters on stereo and remix, the technologies slip into a more metaphorical role. Stereo is partially washed out into a sense of twoness, with the idea of “space” in poems never quite hitting the mark, although this is certainly not to say that Teague’s readings of Hughes and Baraka, in themselves, are anything less than
compelling. Similarly, Teague’s admission that written texts like Dos Passos’s USA featured elements of remix long before remix became a major cultural mode cannibalises some of the force of her framing of Kevin Young and Chuck Palahniuk. It might also have been fruitful to note that compilations made up a good part of early phonograph company catalogues, with popular recordings being shuffled between cylinders. Admittedly, this would have been a diversion from Teague’s specific subject: the remixing of texts by their own authors, in the age of the DJ.

These are barely even criticisms, then, and more just markers of a problem which Teague herself is very careful to note: that written text cannot “imitate recording technologies” (194). There’s a handy encounter with this roadblock in chapter two. Teague reads Lomax’s attempts to describe Jelly Roll Morton’s voice, and notes his use of “synesthetic-aural imagery, which neither serves to approximate the voice nor transcribe it, but rather to reinscribe Morton with an abstract sense of sonic identity” (75). “Abstract” does the heavy lifting here, with Teague going on to describe synesthetic-aural imagery as something taken from the “limited literary-sonic toolbox.” To call Morton’s a “gravel voice melting at the edges” is, to use the word closest to hand, resonant, but it is not in any meaningful sense an act of sound recording. After emerging from Teague’s book, I’m convinced that the sooner we move past the idea of written text as like or imitating sound recording, the better. There are, though, Teague admits, some apparently reliable ways of “infusing language with sound” (75)—things like “onomatopoeia, meter, rhyme.” But even these, I think, work on a spectrum of soundedness, and can do things either to invite or defer our listening ear.

Eyes on the Page

In reading Teague’s breakdown of remix as literary mode, my thoughts began to rest with, or tap along to, the poet Erica Dawson, who currently lives and works in Florida. In her first two collections, Big-Eyed Afraid (2007) and The Small Blades Hurt (2014), Dawson revealed herself as a rhymer par excellence, and perhaps without rival. She rhymes at the end of lines and within them, across all parts and particles of speech, and even across languages. In her most recent book, When Rap Spoke Straight to God (2018), Dawson also plants her flag as an unassailable remixer. At the end of the book (which is made up of one long poem), she acknowledges the writers who have made “cameos,” which include Tupac, The Fugees, and Paul the Apostle (Dawson 49). Between this emphasis on the sounded parts of language and the willingness to mash up and sample, Dawson’s work seems like the perfect candidate for a resonant reading. While her earlier poems tended to announce their formal concerns with their shape (Big-Eyed Afraid, for example, is an extended meditation on the In Memoriam stanza), When Rap Spoke Straight to God is more elusive. The poem opens with what look like couplets:

When U-God from Wu-Tang said, You ain’t heard
us in a minute, rap spoke straight to God.
When I broke bread, it was a syrup sandwich.
I licked all the body off my nails.
I saw two birds stalking a basketball court,
rivalling a confirmation when they spotted
buckled asphalt and saw a growing squall
go smooth [...]
(1)

There’s no rhyme to be found, or, I suppose, to be heard. Rhythm, too, is shifty, with the lines hanging around 10 syllables, but no clear beat making itself known. There’s something very page-bound going on. When Dawson samples U-God, she finds a new sense in the first half of the line. “You ain’t heard,” split from “us,” starts to mean: “you are not heard.” Being heard becomes something done to “you,” not something that U-God can ensure happens, which is the point of the brag on the record. We wouldn’t hear this shift in the poem read aloud—we would hardly hear the line breaks at all. Whatever the printed poem is doing, it isn’t straight speaking.

Something of an opposite manoeuvre is performed later in the poem. We enter onto a section apparently committed to free verse:

For some, it don’t mean a thing without the swing of a gavel, and a trace of doubt can trump a circumstance.
Oh beautiful for skies too small
Today, the papers boasted this –
*Five Local Policemen Tied to KKK* –
italicized as if to shout, *It’s new.* This.
(11)

The line spacing seems willingly disrupted, as Dawson skips between tracks—from Duke Ellington’s “It don’t mean a thing” to a corrupted version of “America, the Beautiful.” Neither lyric is left to settle; both are made strange by a quirk of the page. Put on the lookout for ear tricks and eye tricks, it probably won’t take the reader long to realise what’s afoot in the next run of lines:

When I went outside, thinking I knew something of Frost’s birches, that endless swing of left to right, the day managed to trump up stillness.

Today, I’m reading noon. The sky’s pastoral. Cumuli passing for this creature or that one, stallions, maybe K-9 dogs, maybe the alphabet with K then O, maybe this sentence: *That kid knew he had no business here.*
(12)

Swing, trump, skies, this, KKK, new. Knew, swing, trump, sky’s, this, K-. Where I’ve ended the quotation, Dawson’s sestina has already begun a new round. It’s not the standard order for a sestina, but a pattern where the end circles back to the beginning: 1 2 3 4 5 6 // 6 1 2 3 4 5 // 5 6 1 2 3 4, etc. The stanzas (although in refusing line breaks they shrug off that label) are filled with the idle. Flicking through papers, reading a literary magazine, watching clouds. The sestina seems, then, to be a game. It’s another way of filling time, and filling space. But as clouds morph into police dogs, and the newspaper fails to be new, so the sestina can’t avoid the inevitable. For such an involved form to work, every end-word has to give its all. The first stanza’s “trump” eventually has to abandon the pretence, and become the “Donald Trump” who was lurking there all along (13). The shift comes almost with a sigh, as if Dawson didn’t want
to have to talk about Trump, and was putting it off as long as possible. Samples can make their own demands.

11 We could do well to heed Teague’s advice, and listen to Dawson listening. Sound is always mediated, and a sample is not a perfect copy. Indeed, even as new sampling technology has made that perfection possible, there has been a drive towards deliberate lo-fi, with things like vinyl simulators making up, or making down, for the glossiness of high bit rates. When Dawson samples—be it from Wu Tang, Robert Frost, or from her own line-endings in a sestina—there is always a shift, a recoding, or a corruption. We don’t need to make any claims for her complex form as a recording device, beyond noting that every recording is a remediating, and that there is thus something shared between magnetic tape and written verse. To read with resonance, as Teague shows, is always to read, not to listen, but listening might be what the text most wants us to think about.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. As I go on to describe, these authors all make strong cases for their presence in the book, but the history of sound technology is plagued by a male-coded geekiness, and a more equitable gender-balance might have been welcome.
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Subjects: Recensions

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