Listening to the Imagined Sound of Contemporary Australian Literature

JOSEPH CUMMINS
INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

Listening and reading literature. These two activities are maybe counter-intuitive partners. In sensual terms, one mostly concerns the ear, the other the eye. When we listen, it is, usually, mostly to sound, to resonance, physical vibration—although composer and sound theorist John Cage tells us we can also listen to silence. When we read, it is a silent activity. Of course, we can listen to words, to a reading or an audiobook, and we can listen to poetry. But often, perhaps mostly, we read in silence.

As a tool of literary analysis, listening encourages us to examine the fusion of sensual textures, language, ideas, histories and landscapes a writer is exploring.[1] Listening grounds works in the here and now, both with the intentions of the author, but also in the complex ways texts can be taken up. New meanings can resonate within and beyond whatever an author may have intended. Listening does not close off the potential of a text, it opens it. Letting the texts speak for themselves and being open to what they are saying is a vitally important part of how I listen to literature. In this spirit, in this article I will spend a lot of time in texts, closely reading and listening to them. Giving space to the texts is also part of the ethical imperative to listen. We have to let sounds and silences resonate on their own. Texts talk and sound for themselves, if we are willing to listen.

What I will pursue in this paper is how, amidst this readerly silence, we are also *imagining* sounds, the sounds that are described in the words on the page. Writing by Alexis Wright, Christos Tsiolkas, and Alex Miller uses a profusion of sonic description. Works by these writers—*Carpentaria* by Wright, *Barracuda* by Tsiolkas, and *Max* by Miller—are structured around different kinds of resonance. Out of all the writing that activates sound, I've chosen these three works because they amplify three of the different ways that sound can work in literature. This article is designed to be like a methodological demonstration. The approach I'll be using is what I call listening to imagined sound. It is *imagined* sound because it is created by descriptive language, by the ways words are arranged, by ideas, not just the physical vibration of resonant sound.

The first book that made me really sit up and take notice of this kind of sound was Alex Miller's *Journey to the Stone Country* (2002).[2] Later, I was thinking about imagined spaces, like nations, so I read Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*. Discussing the role of what he calls unofficial national anthems, songs like "Waltzing Matilda," Anderson comments that "nothing connects us all but imagined sound" (6). For Anderson, the sound of the national song places the singer and listener into an imagined construction of space and time. A national song enables individuals from across a vast space to, simultaneously, become one. Imagined sound is closely related to Anderson's analysis of the nature of the national community, which is, "*imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). The three works by Wright, Tsiolkas, and Miller all, in their own ways, work to break out of the space of the nation, to reimagine the national song.

Through listening we can understand how writers are pushing at the boundaries of how we remember the past, how we can make sense of the present, and how the future can be imagined.

From songline mappings, to chants of the body and the sporting nation, and finally to silence, these three works use a diversity of sounds to tell their stories. In some ways we could think of these books as a mixtape, a best-of compilation, not a detailed sonic survey of the state of Australian literature. What I hear and comment upon in these three works is only just the beginning of what resounds in them.

". . . the enormity of those sounds": *Carpentaria*

Alexis Wright's masterpiece *Carpentaria*, published in 2006, has been recognised as an innovative and vitally important contribution to both local and world literature. There is a significant amount of literary criticism relating to this novel and to Wright's work in general (see Devlin-Glass, "A Politics of the Dreamtime"; Brewster, "Indigenous Sovereignty"; Ng, "Translocal Temporalities") but of particular relevance to my discussion are essays by Laura Joseph ("Dreaming Phantoms and Golems") and Paul Sharrad ("Beyond *Capricornia*").

The focus of my listening to *Carpentaria* is to register how the novel is charted by sonorous songlines and shrouded in First Nations sounds, a resonance that erases the recent colonial past. Listening closely reveals the spatial and temporal complexity of *Carpentaria*, and its contemporary ecological relevance. Recording the movements of ancestral figures, songlines have commonly been performed through a combination of singing and dancing. Although this original form has obviously been transformed significantly in *Carpentaria*, I argue that Wright's cacophonous creation, in reimagining a traditional form of First Nations performance, knowledge and cartography, reorients Australian continental space. *Carpentaria* is a *novelistic songline*, a contemporary refashioning of the novel form.

An interconnected series of family and community disagreements are woven into the epic sonic fabric of *Carpentaria*, and it is no surprise that Wright's two protagonists—Normal Phantom and his son Will—are adept at listening. Norm Phantom, a name that perhaps echoes the central character of Xavier Herbert's 1938 novel *Capricornia*, is leader of the Pricklebush mob. Norm and his son Will have fallen out as a result of Will's involvement in guerilla sabotage of a nearby mine—and because of his relationship with Hope (whose father is Norm's nemesis Joseph Midnight, the leader of the Eastside mob). Enfolded within the larger cyclical patterns of weather, destruction and renewal, the many events in the narrative, such as the arrival and later death of Elias Smith, the explosive destruction of the Gurfurrit mine, and the final storm that destroys Desperance, are events that mark the different locations on *Carpentaria*'s songline map.

Through imagined sound we also hear *Carpentaria* as a contemporary iteration of First Nations Dreaming. Deborah Bird Rose explains how Australia is "criss-crossed with the tracks of the Dreamings: walking, slithering, crawling, flying, chasing, hunting, weeping, dying, giving birth" (111). These tracks on the land are manifest throughout *Carpentaria*, most importantly as the Ancestral Serpent described in the opening of the novel, and the storm spirits that dominate the end. Aileen Morton-Robinson has also highlighted how "[k]nowledge and beliefs tied to the Dreaming inform the present and future. Within this system of beliefs, there is scope for interpretation and change by individuals through dreams and their lived experiences" (11–12). With its cyclical evocation of First Nations (and colonial) histories and present/future movements, Wright is also clearly working within this conception of Dreaming. Scholars of First Nations performance history such as Maryrose Casey (*Telling Stories*) and Anna Haebich (*Dancing in Shadows*) have also highlighted the similar malleability of multiple other First Nations performance traditions.

But what are songlines? In short, they bundle together spatial and sacred knowledge.[3] Murrandoo Yanner explains the interconnection of travel, trade and country within the concept of the songline: "Travel was made possible by songlines and the rivers are connected to the songlines and naturally trade routes followed the rivers . . . Most of the rivers are in song . . . and trade routes are the physical evidence of the songlines" (quoted in Kerwin 47). Paul Tacon suggests that in contemporary times the tracks "illustrate ways of conceptualising land other than through the printed maps, roads and hard political boundaries so typical of the modern world" (72–73). Yanner and Tacon speak to the pragmatic use of the songline as a map for trade and movement, but the spiritual underpinning of the concept is always integral. Judy Atkinson has drawn out the value of songlines as narratives "about relationships between people and relationships with country" (26). Atkinson also emphasises the ceremonial importance of the songline.

> Relationships with the natural world, and in particular the distressed feelings that accompany a natural disaster such as drought or flood, were ritualised so that healing, or a restoration of good relationships, could occur in the land with other living species, and between the land and the people. (26)

The way Atkinson underlines the restorative function of the songline as ceremony harmonises with the distress caused by mining, the stormy renewal that brings the novel to its conclusion, and the domestic and community dramas that run parallel to these events. Wright's own description of the imaginative footings of her novel also connects *Carpentaria* to the songline. Wright states how the novel "started to be written like a long song, following ancient tradition, reaching back as much as it reached forward, to tell a contemporary story on our ground" (7).

While the novel as a whole is a novelistic songline, there are also several subtle references to songlines within the text. The travels of Mozzie Fisherman and his band of disciples are one direct expression. But the section in the novel I want to focus on may have escaped your attention. It occurs deep in *Carpentaria*, when Joseph Midnight gives Will Phantom instructions on how to find his partner Hope and child Bala. The scene literally stages the singing of a songline:

> The old man gave him directions to the safe place in his far-off country—a blow-by-blow description sung in song, unraveling a map to a dreamtime place he had never seen . . . old man Midnight remembered a ceremony he had never performed in his life before, and now, to his utter astonishment, he passed it on to Will. He went on and on, fully believing he was singing in the right sequence hundreds of places in a journey to a place at least a thousand kilometers away. "sing this time. Only that place called such and such. This way, remember. Don't mix it up. Then next place, sing, such and such. Listen to me sing it now and only when the moon is above, like there, a bit lower, go on, practice. Remember, don't make mistakes . . ." The song was so long and complicated and had to be remembered in the right sequence where the sea was alive, waves were alive, currents alive, even the clouds. (360)

Joseph's songline signals a moment of ceremonial importance while also demonstrating knowledge transmission between generations. It is a map of Will's pathway through the rest of the novel, as he searches for his partner and daughter. Interestingly, possessing the knowledge of the songline does not lead Will to his family. We leave him still searching for Hope and Bala. Will's

individual journey is only one strand in the larger fabric of the novel, but, as one of two heroes, his movements are important events on the larger songline of *Carpentaria*.

Joseph Midnight's songline is presented in such a way that its specific form and content remains hidden from the ears and eyes of the reader, putting even more emphasis on the imagination. Unlike when Wright uses figurative language to describe sounds, here none of the textural or tonal information regarding the actual "sound" of the songline is provided. There is very little indication of the tone of Joseph's voice—although his surprise at being able to remember and perform the songline is noted—and none of the exact places and directions contained in the songline are named. All that is mentioned is that the map leads to a "dreamtime place." That much traditional First Nations music is secret—only to be performed by/for the initiated—is an important context for Wright's depiction here.

From this moment of almost secret resonance, I'll now direct our listening attention to the end of the novel. After following Joseph Midnight's instructions, and surviving the ravages of the storm, Will ends up floating away from the mainland. Remixing the noise created by the passing of the wreckage of Desperance in the floodwaters of the storm, Wright gives us the following complex soundscape:

> The clouds broke, the new moon shone its halo of peace. Relieved for such an absolution of light, [Will] looked down to find he had been dumped onto an extraordinary floating island of rubbish.
>
> While the serpentine floatation rocked in the waves, the sum total of its parts rubbed, grated and clanked together, as it became more tightly enmeshed into a solid mass that squashed every inch of oil and stench out of the dead marine life it had trapped in its guts. Will listened to the embryonic structure's strange whines echoing off into the darkness, then, he realised the enormity of those sounds was familiar to him. He was astonished and then weakened by the feeling of helplessness, that a man feels, hearing the sounds of labour. He felt like he was an intruder to be clinging to a foetus inside the birth canal, listening to it, witnessing the birth of creation in the throes of a watery birth. (475)

Will's feeling that he is in the birth canal—an experience of listening surreal in its sensation of interiority—figures the island as a newborn baby. "Hearing the sounds of labour" is at once a reference to childbirth, but at the same time it captures the grinding movement and sound that is continuing to form the island. It is both a lifeboat and a search vessel, an Edenic garden and a prison.[4]

Drifting away from the mainland and the bounds of the nation, the island is the sound of *Carpentaria*'s regenerative achievement. It's a microcosmic formation of space, a localised cartography, but one that lets us imagine future possibilities. Instead of the bounded, insular continent we have the interconnection and openness of the archipelago. In Laura Joseph's lexicon, the island of rubbish is "dynamic" and "alchemical" in its violent material reconstruction, "disobedient" with regard to continental unity, and "archipelagic" in its relation to the mainland of Australia and the surrounding expanse of sea. Alongside the final scene of Norm and Bala singing the croaking mudflats of Desperance, the island of rubbish explicitly manifests *Carpentaria*'s sonorous statement of decolonisation and renewal.

"... like a kind of prayer": *Barracuda*

Christos Tsiolkas's *Barracuda* (2013) continues his explorations of Australian class, culture, masculinity and sexuality that began with his first novel *Loaded* (1995). These works, both vibrantly sonic, depict a young gay Greek Australian man struggling to fit in with and reshape Australian hegemonic culture. At the same time, the concern with sport is new for Tsiolkas. There has been some valuable work done on *Barracuda*—including by Andrew McCann, Jessica Gildersleeve, and Dion Kagan—but nothing that examines the novel in sonic terms.

My close listening will examine two interconnected aspects of the way sound works in a structured and repetitive mode. Firstly, sound drives Danny's formation as an elite athletic body. Of course, he fails to become elite, he can never be a Golden Boy (the half-adulatory half-derisive term Danny has for members of the Australian swimming team). This failure is perhaps the key statement made by Tsiolkas. Secondly, sound also opens a national space, one that this athletically refined body is attempting to glorify, to become a hero and symbol of.

The theorisation I draw on to help me listen to the kinds of sounds Tsiolkas uses in *Barracuda* is "the refrain," a concept set out by French philosophers Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their book *A Thousand Plateaus*. Deleuze and Guattari use the example of birdsong—repetitive, rhythmic song that demarcates a territory—to illustrate the working of the refrain. It is, for Deleuze and Guattari, "a crystal of space time" (385). In comparison to a soundscape—an environment of sound made up of several sonic elements—a refrain is more tightly coiled, compact, and repetitive. Other examples of refrains include many genres of music, which may have repeating melodies or rhythms. Dance music, pop songs, church hymns—these are ways of organising sound into music. The calls of market vendors are also refrains. They open and resonate within a certain kind of space.

On page twelve of the novel, we encounter perhaps the key refrain of *Barracuda*. It contains all the ideology of the elite athlete, and Danny repeats it over and over throughout the first half of the book. "He was better than them all. Stronger, faster, better. Strongest, fastest, best" (12). Tsiolkas is referencing the Olympic motto "*Citius, Altius, Fortius*" ("Faster, Higher, Stronger"—and considering his love of popular music, there is perhaps also an echo of the Daft Punk song "Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger" here). This refrain is like a mantra, one to harden Danny, but also drive him, to help him *become* a kind of machine of excellent movement, to use some of the lexicon of Deleuze and Guattari. Even when Danny is mixing with social elites, such as the family of Martin Taylor, his friend from school, he still has the refrain running through his head. Sitting at the dinner table with the whole Taylor clan, Danny thinks "You are better, he told himself, you are faster, you are stronger. You are better than all of them" (122). This "faster stronger" refrain comes up countless times in the novel, in different permutations.

Danny's refrain is interior, personal. It is designed to push him above, to make him outstanding, to elevate. Early in the novel Danny daydreams a scene of success, about a time "when all of Australia and all of the world was watching him and cheering him and he won the four hundred meter freestyle and the cheering was so loud that it flooded the arena, flooded the country, flooded the world" (58). Here we hear not just the arena, the local space of competition, not just the nation, sport-crazed Australia, but the world. This cheering is a sonic embodiment of encouragement, joy, exultation in acknowledging the feats of someone representing us, the people. It is the validation and affirmation that Danny craves. It signals his success, his elite status.

Early in the novel Tsiolkas writes a scene that is pivotal to the formation of Danny's desire to be a winner. Danny watches the final of the 1996 Atlanta Olympics 1500m Freestyle. The race

was won by Keiren Perkins, one of the most golden of the Golden Boys in that era of Australian swimming. "Danny was saying the names to himself like a kind of prayer: *Kowalski, Perkins, Brembilla; Kowalski, Perkins, Brembilla*. That was what he was hoping for, Kowalski, Perkins, Brembilla" (77). The names are a holy chant. It is noticeable that Danny is using the names in a personal way, saying the names to himself. It is also telling that Danny is cheering more for Daniel Kowalski, who ends up coming second—in other words Kowalski is the first loser, the first failure in this race. This identification with Kowalski is Danny's feeling of being an outsider, or not being a Golden Boy.

Later, in a school setting, Danny receives the chanted validation of his peers, and, by extension, Cunts College, the exclusive institution they are part of.

> And Tsitsas and Wilco, Scooter and Fraser, they all took up the chant.
> *Barracuda. Barracuda.*
> And the rest of the boys joined in.
> *Barracuda.*
> And even Coach, even Frank Torma was calling out.
> *Barracuda.*
> Calling it out, clapping, stamping, cheering. All cheering for him.
> "Barracuda!"
> "Danny Kelly!"
> "Barracuda!"
> "Danny Kelly!"
> Then he felt it. Then it really meant something. (90–91)

This is a moment of transcendence for Danny. He is held aloft by sound, by the sound of his own name and nickname, no less, chanted by the crowd. Where Benedict Anderson theorises how national songs create an imagined community, one that can use sound to bypass the immense space of the nation to unify all, in this moment we witness the immediacy of sound. They are "all cheering for him." He is elite, success is imminent, he is no longer an outsider. But Danny's journey does not lead him to national glory. He fails to win any international races, and instead has a public breakdown. He fails to display the kind of sportsmanship required by the situation; his behavior is taboo, shameful. He loses motivation to succeed and conform at school, and eventually lashes out in an extreme and violent way, almost killing Martin Taylor, a character who is emblematic of the social elite, in contrast with Danny the outsider.

While Danny's "faster better" refrain and story is personal, in *Barracuda* Tsiolkas also writes a national story, and this national space has its own refrain. The moment where we hear the national refrain—the Sydney Olympics, in the year 2000—occurs in the second half of the novel, after Danny's failure. To emphasise Danny's rejection of all that he previously aspired to be, to mark the break with his aspirations to be elite, he has taken a job in a supermarket.

> He was in aisle eight, stacking tins of soup on the shelf. Each tin carried the Olympic logo and the words *Sydney Olympics 2000*.
>
> "Aussie Aussie Aussie," muttered Dan, "Oi Oi Oi."
>
> They were the real brain dead. The ones who kept screaming, *Aussie Aussie Aussie, Oi Oi Oi.* (255)

For Danny, the national chant is for the mindless mass. Unlike his personal refrain, there is nothing specific, nothing motivating here. It is simply the nation ("Aussie") affirming ("oI") itself.

But instead of leaving us with this sonic realisation of the nation, Tsiolkas also includes another refrain. Again, it is composed of a name. Following his attempt to watch the opening ceremony of the Sydney games in a pub with some friends, Dan (as he is known in his post-athlete life) is wandering the streets, upset. He hears this:

> *"Cath-ee, Cath-ee!"*
> Dan jumped back from the shop window, startled by the sudden return of sound. But it wasn"t coming from the televisions. He looked up; the light from a screen flicked silver and gray and white on the walls and windows of an apartment above the shop. There was a party on up there, and he could hear muted cheering. He looked at the television again and saw the torch being passed to Cathy Freeman, the young Aboriginal runner . . . She began her proud jog up an illuminated staircase of brilliant white, smoke wreathing and spilling like water down the pearl steps—*Cath-ee! Cath-ee!*—and he was sure now that it was not only from the apartment above that he could hear the chant; he thought it was an echo of the madness of an entire country, the whole of the world. "Go, Cathy," Dan called softly through the bars. "Go Cathy. You're not one of those golden girls."

This national chant is distinctly different from the abhorrent Aussie chant that was taken up with such regularity at the Sydney Olympics (and at sporting events that featured national teams). Cathy Freeman was not one of the elites of the pool. She was an outsider, even if she was taken up by the Australian nation *en masse*. Notice here how Danny even joins in. He affirms this national chant because it is inclusive of other bodies, of other stories. In this sense *Barracuda* does offer us more than a portrait of athletic failure.

"the vast silence of his inner life": *Max*

Alex Miller's career as a novelist began in the late 1980s. *Max* (2020) is a biographical family history travelog focused on his German Jewish mentor and friend Max Blatt. Max was integral in giving Miller the confidence to be a writer: "It was Max who encouraged me, who convinced me that the purpose of the writer could be a noble one. It was in this belief that my inspiration as a writer had resided for more than forty years" (23). There are a number of aspects to this belief. One is the way Max shares an episode from his life, which Miller transforms into the short story "Comrade Pawal," his first published work. This is a sharing of memory and experience—we see this act of friendship and sharing perhaps most notably in Miller's *Landscape of Farewell* (2007), where a First Nations Australian character tells the story of a massacre. A thinly veiled Miller-like character imagines and writes down the story, and uses imagined sound (see Cummins, *The "Imagined Sound"*).

Max records Miller's journey towards uncovering and understanding his friend's past. The book details the relationships formed and research undertaken in Australia, Germany, Poland, and Israel. Moments of lucky coincidence lead towards Miller meeting members of Max's family. Miller is haunted by Max's story, or the little of it he knows. He is haunted by what has been said, but also by the silence, by absence, by what has not been said. These kinds of silences are also very common in family history research and literature.[5] They spur researchers on, to know more

about ancestors and the past. My listening to the imagined sound of *Max* will examine the different types of silence in the book. Of course, it is not all silence. Miller evokes the power of the voice: "I *heard* Max telling me the story, the sound of his voice that night by the fire at the cottage in Araluen as familiar and convincing to me as the reality of the farm kitchen itself" (49). Resonance means presence, it can transport us into the past, bring the past in the present, and fire the imagination.

While Max is present in memory and archive, Miller's book is dominated by silence. On page three he describes his reaction to hearing about Max's death: "[S]uddenly it was too late and I would never be able to explain to him the reason for my silence of the past two years" (3). This is a deathly silence, a silence that sounds isolation, disconnection, shame, but it is only one of several tonalities in this book. There is knowledge and even pleasure to be gained from listening to silence. Alex remembers sharing silence with Max, as the older man told parts of his story: "I thought of us in his living room in the Lucan Street house, he and I sharing our thoughts until afternoon became evening . . . our silence filled with the pleasure and promise of friendship, giving the present moment time to offer up its meaning" (3–4). Miller describes how, "[w]henever he and I were alone, I saw how the vast silence of his inner life drew him back into himself, like the dark attraction of an invisible world, compelling him to an unwilling silence" (21). He also relates how "the less [Max] said the more I remembered everything he said" (4). Silence resonates with and as memory, with the past, and with the past as it is thought of and narrated in the present. It is mysterious. It is interior, private.

Like many family historians, Miller explains that he is worried that what he will discover about Max will taint the memory of his friend: "He was my hero, but he had also been a man, a man whose past had been concealed within a deep silence that he broke only rarely" (13). Silence hides, obscures. Miller writes how "[t]he silence of the archives on Max's past existence was eerily unbroken. I felt as if it was a black mirror of his own silence. Perhaps, after all, there *was* nothing to be found" (17). Miller even describes Max's demeanour in sonic terms: "There was something fine and tragic in the vastness of your silence" (15). *Max* is perhaps the most silent book I have ever read, particularly in comparison with the sonic profusion of *Carpentaria*—a mapping of epic proportions—and an extremely loud, vocal novel like *Barracuda*.

Shards and fragments are one of the central ways that Miller thinks about Max's history and story, how he makes sense of some of the silence. The book's epigraph is from Joseph Roth: "the shard outlives the pot." The book is organised into eighteen fragments (or chapters). Initially the fragments show a past shrouded in the silence of the unknown. Later the fragments are part of a coming together, a personal resolution for both Miller and Max's living family. Placing the resonance that saturates the book into the context of a narrative defined by the shard and the fragment, I hear silence filling the spaces between. Silence is never nothing, it is something to be heard. It can be affirming and connecting. Something to be shared and even savored. Perhaps just as importantly, silence is a space in which the imagination can create. It is vital for the writer of fiction, and nonfiction. As Miller explains, imagination creates wholeness:

> Max's story is a scatter of broken shards. That is its nature. Almost its central truth. It is a ruined house. Like the bombed-out houses of my childhood after the war. The pieces were violently blown apart, many of them ground to dust. To fill in the gaps with the imagination, as if all the pieces could still be located by imagining them, to write as if nothing of value was lost, and lost forever, would be to deny the tragedy

> of his story. It would be to miss the truth of the times, when many of the most beautiful things were lost, and truth itself was lost. (145)

Miller's insistence on not filling in the gaps is part of his ongoing exploration of the responsibility of the author, and the differences between fictional and biographical writing. Perhaps his most sustained reflection on these concerns occurs in *The Ancestor Game* (1992). But what is important to the responsibility of the imaginative writer here is recognition of and respect for the resonance in a story. After learning as many details as he could find about Max's past, such as the fate of his wife and family, Miller realises the essence of Max's story:

> There was no wholeness. Many of the most precious and beautiful things that had once been part of Max's and his family's life had been smashed beyond recovery. The mosaic of their story was contained in an incomplete collection of shards. Large parts of the picture were missing and would never be recovered. His song, the song of his family, had no chorus in which all the voices sing together. Silence had become one of Max's unperishable truths. His silence, that mysterious silence that had drawn me to him the very first time I met him, contained a whole world that no longer existed and would never exist again. (210–11)

Miller's use of the structure of a song to think about Max's life is striking. The inescapable reality that there can be no unified moment "when all the voices sing together" is something that Miller, and Max's relatives, must be reconciled with.

While Miller's journey into the past of his friend is mostly concerned with his personal journey through World War Two and the Holocaust, there is an important resonance between the silence that resounds through this history and the silences in Australian history. Miller has previously explored this silence, particularly in his 2007 novel *Landscape of Farewell*. I have already mentioned one strong resonance between *Max* and *Landscape of Farewell*—one character telling their story to another, who transforms and imagines this personal testimony into words. Listening more closely to this dynamic, the main character of *Landscape* is also named Max—Max Otto—a German professor of history. He forms a deep friendship with a First Nations man, Dougald Gnapun. Both have histories that are shrouded in silence. For Max, the silence surrounds his father's involvement in atrocities committed in the war. For Dougald, silence permeates his own life, the abuse he suffered growing up, and of course the lack of recognition of the experience of First Nations peoples.

Drawing on W. E. H. Stanner's influential 1969 Boyer Lecture "After the Dreaming," Jane Belfrage has termed the silence surrounding many aspects of colonial history "The Great Australian Silence." Belfrage describes how, in the colonial invasion of Australia, "[f]oreign, "deaf," visually-oriented knowledge practices of handwritten and printed texts usurped sovereignty in the knowledge soundscapes of the land" (2). For Belfrage, silence is the tonality of Australian colonial history, the product of an epistemological, forced and violent shift to the written. The resonance between these two histories, European and Australian, these two silences, is at the core of much of Miller's work. Listening to this silence helps place *Max*, a book of nonfiction, into the wider context of Miller's oeuvre, and it underscores the sustained nature of his use of silence.

There is much more I could listen to and discuss in *Max*, and *Barracuda*, and *Carpentaria.* This essay amplifies just some of the potential of listening to literature, and some of the sensual

and conceptual nuance in these works. Listening to these three books—as diverse a trio as you could hope to find—gives some indication of the potential of "imagined sound" as a methodological tool that can make sense of a variety of histories, narratives, and artistic concerns, not just in the context of Australian literature, but for other conceptions of space, history, and the imagination.

NOTES

[1] Some of the important work in the multidisciplinary field of sound studies has been undertaken by R. Murray Schafer (*The Soundscape*), Garett Stewart (*Reading Voices*), Martin Jay (*Downcast Eyes*), Steven Connor (*Dumbstruck*), Emily Thompson (*Soundscape of Modernity*), Jonathan Sterne (*The Audible Past*), and David Toop (*Sinister Resonance*).

[2] See Chapter 4 of Joseph Cummins, *The "Imagined Sound" of Australian Literature and Music* (Anthem, 2019).

[3] *Song Spirals: Sharing Women's Wisdom of Country through Songlines* by the Gay-wu Group of Women is one of the most recent works on songlines.

[4] These conceptions of island space are played out again and again in the literature of islands, as the research of Elizabeth McMahon has shown (*Islands, Identity and the Literary Imagination*).

[5] See Barnwell and Cummins, *Reckoning with the Past: Family Historiographies in Postcolonial Australian Literature* (Routledge, 2019).

WORKS CITED

Atkinson, Judy. *Trauma Trails, Recreating Song Lines: The Transgenerational Effects of Trauma in Indigenous Australia*. Spinifex, 2002.

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, 1991.

Barnwell, Ashley, and Joseph Cummins. *Reckoning with the Past: Family Historiographies in Postcolonial Australian Literature*. Routledge, 2019.

Belfrage, Jane. "The Great Australian Silence: Inside Acoustic Space." *The Australian Sound Design Project*. U of Melbourne, 2001. http://www.sounddesign.unimelb.edu.au/site/papers/AusSilence.html.

Brewster, Anne. "Indigenous Sovereignty and the Crisis of Whiteness in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*." *Australian Literary Studies*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2010, pp. 85–100.

Cage, John. "Experimental Music Doctrine." *Silence: Lectures and Writing*. Wesleyan UP, 1961.

Casey, Maryrose. *Telling Stories: Aboriginal Australian and Torres Strait Islander Performance*. Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2012.

Connor, Steven. *Dumbstruck: A History of Ventriloquism*. Oxford UP, 2001.

Cummins, Joseph. *The "Imagined Sound" of Australian Literature and Music*. Anthem P, 2019.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi, Continuum, 1987.

Devlin-Glass, Frances. "A Politics of the Dreamtime: Destructive and Regenerative Rainbows in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*." *Australian Literary Studies*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2008, pp. 392–407.

Gay-wu Group of Women. *Song Spirals: Sharing Women's Wisdom of Country through Songlines*. Allen & Unwin, 2019.

Gildersleeve, Jessica. *Christos Tsiolkas: The Utopian World Vision.* Cambria P, 2017.

Haebich, Anna. *Dancing in Shadows: Histories of Nyungar Performance*. U of Western Australia Publishing, 2018.
Herbert, Xavier. *Capricornia.* HarperCollins, 2013.
Jay, Martin. *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in 20th Century French Thought*. U of California P, 1993.
Joseph, Laura. "Dreaming Phantoms and Golems: Elements of the Place beyond the Nation in Carpentaria and Dreamhunter." *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2009, pp. 1–10.
Kagan, Dion. "Fish In and Out of Water: The Embodied Erotics of Class and Sport in *Barracuda*." *Metro Magazine: Media & Education Magazine*, no. 191, 2017, pp. 34–41.
Kerwin, Dale. *Aboriginal Dreaming Paths and Trading Routes: The Colonisation of the Australian Economic Landscape*. Sussex Academic P, 2010.
Morton-Robinson, Aileen. *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty.* U of Minnesota P, 2015.
McMahon, Elizabeth. *Islands, Identity and the Literary Imagination*. Anthem P, 2016.
McCann, Andrew. *Christos Tsiolkas and the Fiction of Critique: Politics, Obscenity, Celebrity*. Anthem P, 2015.
Miller, Alex. *Journey to the Stone Country.* Allen & Unwin, 2002
———. *Landscape of Farewell*. Allen & Unwin, 2007.
———. *Max*. Allen & Unwin, 2020.
———. *The Passage of Love.* Allen & Unwin, 2017.
Ng, Lynda. "Translocal Temporalities in Alexis Wright's Carpentaria." *Postcolonial Translocations: Cultural Representation and Critical Spatial Thinking*, edited by Mark Stein, Markus Schmitz, Silke Stroh, and Marga Munkeit, Rodopi, 2013, pp. 109–26.
Rose, Deborah Bird. "Dreaming Ecology: Beyond and Between." *Religion and Literature*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2008, pp. 109–12.
Stewart, Garrett. *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext*. U of California P, 1990.
Sterne, Jonathan. *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*. Duke UP, 2003.
Sharrad, Paul. "Beyond *Capricornia*: Ambiguous Promise in Alexis Wright." *Australian Literary Studies*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2009, pp. 52–65.
Schafer, R. Murrey. *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*. Destiny Books, 1993.
Stanner, W. E. H. "After the Dreaming." *The 1968 Boyer Lectures*. Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1969.
Tacon, Paul. "Chains of Connection." *Griffith Review*, no. 9, 2005, pp. 1–7.
Thompson, Emily. *The Soundscape of Modernity*. MIT Press, 2002.
Toop, David. *Sinister Resonance: The Mediumship of the Listener.* Continuum, 2010.
Tsiolkas, Christos. *Barracuda*. Allen & Unwin, 2012.
———. *Loaded*. Vintage, 1995.
Wright, Alexis. *Carpentaria*. Giramondo, 2012.
———. "On Writing *Carpentaria*." *Heat Magazine*, no. 13, 2007, pp. 79–95.