

Critical Soundings: Voice, Space and Sound in Australian Literature

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This special issue will consider whether it is possible to claim a distinct sonic texture for Australian literary and cultural formations. What kind of readings result from attending to the relation between silence and the colonial past in Judith Wright's poetry, to the litany of voices in Christina Stead's modern vision of Sydney, or the complex links between music and landscape in Tim Winton's Western Australian coast? Since the coining of the term 'soundscape' by R. Murray Schafer in 1969 there has been a growing critical awareness of the sonic dimensions of modern culture. Indeed Jonathan Sterne has argued in *The Audible Past* (2003) that just as 'there was an Enlightenment, so too was there an 'Ensoniment' ...a series of conjunctures among ideas, institutions, and practices [that] rendered the world audible in new ways and valorised new constructs of hearing and listening' (2). Paralleling the broader cultural focus of Sterne, theoretical work by Steven Connor and Juan Suarez has argued for an attunement to the auditory dimensions of literary experience, rethinking what Garrett Stewart suggestively describes in *Reading Voices* (1990) as 'the listening throat and mouth of the reading voice' (11). Extending this historical and theoretical work on sound into an Australian context, this special issue will explore the multiple auditory dimensions of aesthetic, literary and sonic practices in a range of historical, geographical and cultural domains.

Garrett Stewart's seminal analysis of reading as a form of silent voicing or 'textual sounding' captures the theoretical conundrum inherent in a critical project that is concerned with the relationship between sound, noise and literature. For Stewart, thinking about silence speaking words prompts a shift in the typical line of questioning that one applies when thinking critically about reading—why do we read? Whom do we read? How do we read? What and when do we read? What are we actually reading? Which kind or sort of reading are we engaged in? Instead of focusing our attention on issues of critical method, canon formation, historical determinants, or linguistic or semiotic codes, thinking about reading voices derives from a more fundamental and alien question, according to Stewart: 'Where do we read?' (1). Indifferent to the resonant materiality of social spaces or natural environments, such as libraries, living rooms, gardens, parks, or the bush, the place of reading for Stewart is located in the receptivity of the body to phonic and graphic mediations—from the brain's cognitive rhythms to the reverberating surfaces of the diaphragm, throat, tongue and palate.

In the late 1980s when Stewart was writing *Reading Voices*, to read 'aurally', or practice what Stewart dubbed 'phonemic reading', seemed to jar with the pervasive phonophobia inspired by the Derridean critique of the Logos. But Stewart argued that the converse was true. Attending to the phonemic counterpart to printed text or the dynamics of 'inner audition', as he calls it, did not mean reanimating the myth of the 'originary Voice' before the letter: instead it created a space to develop a more responsive approach to the 'phenomenality' of literary reading (3). Central to this 'phenomenal' approach was a privileging of listening over hearing, as Stewart succinctly observes: 'When we read to

ourselves, our ears hear nothing. Where we read, however, we listen' (11). Stewart derives this distinction from Barthes' insistence in *The Responsibility of Forms*: 'Hearing is a physiological phenomenon; listening is a psychological act' (245). Listening in this sense is a self-consciously critical process, a form of attending to the acoustics of a text that involves a more acute awareness of the relationship between subjectivity and textuality and of consciousness to language, than the automatic internalisation of an aesthetic ideal requires.

Variants of Barthes' distinction between hearing and listening—including Jean-Luc Nancy's focus on listening and subjectivity in *Listening* (2002)—echo through critical work on sound in literature, as well as the cognate multidisciplinary field of sound studies which includes cinema studies, media studies, musicology and the history of technology. Sometimes this distinction is characterised as a form of 'ear-witnessing', a term which R. Murray Schafer mobilised to describe, amongst other things, the acoustic precision of writers from Swift, Tolstoy, Hardy, Mann to Faulkner (8-9). For Schafer there was something particular in the ways all of these writers were able to bear witness to and archive the soundscapes of different times and cultures that supplanted the counterfeit descriptions of less attuned ears with an authentic reproducible record. In a less idealist vein Douglas Kahn, in *Noise, Water, Meat* (2001), describes the act of 'listening through history' in the context of the sound saturated modern arts (2). He writes that the twentieth century becomes 'more melilifluous and raucous through historiographic listening, just that much more animated with the inclusion of the hitherto muffled regions of the sensorium' (2). Muffled is a loaded term here, indicating the critical drive to listen to the silenced and peripheral, to investigate issues of cultural history and theory that reveal the 'selective audition' of established traditions of attending to the sounds of the past and present. In contrast to Stewart's ultimately a-historical focus on the phenomenology of phonemic reading, Kahn's method of 'historiographic listening' tracks how the 'auditive states' generated by a modernist experimental avant-garde drowned out 'the social in sound—the political, poetical and ecological' (4).

Jacques Attali ascribes a similar critical power to 'listening' in his 1977 study *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, where he argues that by 'listening to noise, we can better understand where the folly of men and their calculations is leading us, and what hopes it is still possible to have' (3). For Attali, music is never innocent, an unquantifiable or pure sign: it is an organisation of noise that both reflects the manufacture of society and creates the possibility for internal mutations or slight disruptions of its encoded orders and systems. For this reason music can become an 'instrument of understanding' that prompts us 'to decipher a sound form of knowledge' (4) and ideally generate 'a new theoretical practice and reading' capable of interrogating the complex relationships between

...the history of people and the dynamics of the economy on the one hand, and the history of the ordering of noise in codes on the other; predicting the evolution of one by the forms of the other; combining economics and aesthetics; demonstrating that music is prophetic and that social organization echoes it. (5)

Taking inspiration from Marx's dictum that music is 'the mirror of reality', Nietzsche's insistence that music is 'the expression of truth' and Freud's definition of music as a 'text to decipher', listening to music is an inherently political interpretive process for Attali (6). When clamor becomes melody, and dissonance harmony, in other words, when noise becomes sound through the rationalising technology of musical instrumentalisation, it becomes a means of authority as well as a refuge for the 'residual irrationality of the dream': music's power contains the seeds of its subversion. The revolutionary optimism underlying

the subversive possibilities that Attali embraces necessarily co-exists with the coercive force of listening in/eavesdropping, censorship, silence and what Kahn calls 'selective audition'. Assessing the theoretical legacy of Attali's *Noise* in his foreword to the English translation, Fredric Jameson argues that Attali offers us a prospective model for thinking and writing about the 'systematic interrelationship of the various levels of economics, technology, political forms and culture proper' that 'stimulates us to search out the future in the present itself and to see the current situation not merely as a bundle of static and agonising contradictions, but also as the place of emergence of new realities of which we are, as yet only dimly aware' (xiii).

Attali's self-described indiscipline also creates potential interpretative alignments with the acoustic deciphering of literary texts that incorporate musical motifs, rhythms and structures, of which this special issue has a few striking examples, including Christos Tsoolkias's *Loaded*, Tim Winton's *Dirt Music*, Elizabeth Jolley's *The Well*, Judith Wright's haunting rhythmic evocations of the Australian landscape and Gerard Murnane's assertion that rhythm aligns with thought not words. As the essays on these writers variously reveal, the rhythmic formations of music and poetry inter-fuse revelation and critique. Recent critical work in literary studies on rhythm which draws on Henri Lefebvre's influential 'rhythmanalysis' chimes with these writers' rhythmic aesthetics, by providing a way into a more acoustically sensitised form of literary analysis that places particular pressure on the dynamics of mediation. Lefebvre concedes parallels between the rhythmanalyst and the psychoanalyst, but insists on their ultimate difference. Where the psychoanalyst attends closely to the words, information, and confessions of the analysand, the rhythmanalyst listens to the world and above all 'to what are disdainfully called noises, which are said without meaning, and to *murmurs* [rumeurs], full of meaning – and finally he will listen to silences' (19). What this method requires is not only an attuned ear, but a capacity to create a critical distance that allows the ear to register distinct voices, rhythms, and sounds from the noise of everyday-life. For Lefebvre noise is both a generative and disruptive chaos that creates the conditions of possibility for grasping the definitive rhythms of modern urban life, yet to do so one must 'situate oneself simultaneously inside and outside' (19), on the other side of a window frame, or, to return to our focus here, to attend to the 'where' of reading that Garrett Stewart invokes, to remind us of the acoustics of summoning voices in our heads as we read.

Heard and silenced voices are an enduring preoccupation of sound studies and one that has a particular relevance for critical interrogations of the sounds of literature. Writing about the history of modern storytelling as a fall into silence has a particularly long and fraught critical history, most notably and polemically rehearsed in the seminal work of Walter Ong and Walter Benjamin, the latter of whom famously associated the death of storytelling with the birth of the modern novel. Benjamin melancholically observed: 'The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounselled, and cannot counsel others. To write a novel means to carry the incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life' (87). Muffled, silenced and alienated from the sociability and 'counsel' of traditional storytelling, the modern novel reader, according to Benjamin, consumes rather than listens to the voices of others in dialogue: novelistic condensation and complexity replace the fluid indeterminacy of the repetition of familiar tales recounted in the lulling tones of the experienced storyteller. Listening for Benjamin is inextricably linked to the heard voice and distinct from the mediation of print: the 'more self-forgetful the listener', the more deeply the story is 'impressed upon his memory' (91).

Recent work by cultural and literary historians, such as David Vincent and Ivan Krielkamp, has countered this alignment of the novel with silence. According to Vincent the emergence of a modern print culture was a far more rowdy and sociable affair:

At every level, the sound of the human voice was magnified rather than quelled by the mass production and distribution of prose and verse. The simple relationship between the faceless publisher and the soundless reader was disrupted by men and women reciting, singing, shouting, chanting, declaiming, and narrating. (201)

Vincent's compelling demonstration of how nineteenth-century print culture was a vocal culture, and that reading was a rich and various acoustic experience, is a point that Krielkamp expands upon in his analysis of the symbolic power that oral storytelling retains in nineteenth-century fiction from Dickens to Conrad. This was achieved, according to Krielkamp, by the strategic recasting of the novel 'as the utterance of a powerfully authentic speaker' by authors and critics who could thus claim that novelistic language could generate the same kind of collective listening that had traditionally been associated with oral storytelling (3). This discursive alignment of print and voice, reading and listening, was an enduring one, as exemplified by the mobilisation of voice in Raymond Williams' classic reading of Joyce's *Ulysses* in *The Country and the City*:

It is a paradox that in *Ulysses*, through its patterns of loss and frustration, there is not only search but discovery: of an ordinary language, heard more clearly than anywhere in the realist novel before it; a positive flow of that wider human speech which has been screened and strained by the prevailing social conventions: conventions of separation and reduction, in the actual history. The greatness of *Ulysses* is this community of speech. (245)

Williams reads *Ulysses* as a seminal moment in the emergence of a newly enfranchised authentic and identifiably modernist speech community. Christina Stead would have agreed with some version of this reading of Joyce, as her praise of his oeuvre as a 'melting pot of the language and of present literary idiom and banality' indicates (51). A similar desire to channel voices previously suppressed or unheard is also evident in her first novel *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1934), as Helen Groth's essay in this issue suggests. Stead was revising her novel for publication whilst living in Paris and engaging peripherally with the modernist avant-garde. In her correspondence from this period the Parisian community of artists and writers whom she came to know represent a newly found liberty of expression and thought that also echoes Williams' idealistic alignment of the modernist avant-garde's 'discovery' of a form of vocal writing with a politics of freedom and social justice. Yet, as Krielkamp notes, there is an 'unexamined yearning for authority' (15) at the core of this desire for charismatic voices with culturally redemptive powers which in turn might require us to abandon, or at least re-examine 'the metaphor of literary writing as a suppressed or silenced voice' (18).

Mladen Dolar shares Krielkamp's sceptical approach to 'the aesthetic concentration on the voice', which he argues loses the voice 'precisely by turning it into a fetish object' (4). Dolar offers a model of thinking about voice 'which does not go up in smoke in the conveyance of meaning, and does not solidify in an object of fetish reverence,' constituting instead 'an object which functions as a blind spot in the call and as a disturbance of aesthetic appreciation' (4). Monique Rooney's psychoanalytic reading of encrypted voices in Elizabeth Jolley's *The Well* in this issue resonates with Dolar's turn to psychoanalysis to examine what

he calls the ‘excess of the voice-effect’, in which the voice comes ‘to occupy the space of a breach, a missing link, a gap in the causal nexus’ (10). The voice that cannot be easily heard, that must be actively summoned and decrypted, becomes for Dolar a ‘lever for thought’, prompting a ‘search for what exceeds language and meaning’ (11). There are implicit parallels between this line of argument and Garrett Stewart’s attempt to grasp the affective and acoustic dimensions of reading voices with which this introduction began, a form of critical listening or sounding in which the voice functions as the sounding board rather than the source of meaning, as Stewart so evocatively puts it: ‘phonemic reading moves beyond-or behind...Its concern is more with linguistic accident than with aesthetic craft, the lottery of letter and sounds as they pour in and out of lexical molds’ (25). Hazel’s Smith’s discussion of cosmopolitan spaces in the musico-literary work of new media performance group *austraLYSIS* takes up the imperative of this move beyond lexical moulds, exploring the ‘continuum from sonic poetry’ to ‘sound technodrama’ (2). Not only does Smith’s analysis of how *austraLYSIS* tests the ‘interface between speech sounds and musical sounds’ and draws attention to both the intersection of language, meaning and sound, it gestures towards the limits implicit in works discussed by other essays in the issue, which are, to a certain extent, bound by the written medium of the printed text.

The complex narrative operation of the work of *austraLYSIS* highlights the fact that listening to voices in narrative texts is not just an issue of ‘where’ we read, as Bakhtin’s contested analysis of the ‘double-voice discourse’ reminds us, but ‘how’ we read voices mediated through the intrinsically quotational polyvocal form of narrative discourse (199). In the wake of Bakhtin and the debates his work has inspired, to hear and recognise an individual character’s voice raises fundamental questions about the ontology of fiction, as John Frow has recently argued (2014). Understanding why we identify with voices in fictional forms is central to understanding how characters are ‘person-like’ without committing the fundamental category error of mistaking persons and characters as ontologically continuous (vii). Thinking through the ways in which ‘the status of the utterer’, and the layers and varying modes of enunciation blur in ‘complex forms such as free indirect discourse’ (154) helps to reveal the often implicit slippages between character and person involved in our habituated metonymic substitution of voice for character. Voice is understood here as multi-modal, referring to the various verbal art forms for ‘indicating speech, thought, or perception, or an even less formed level of sensation and affect’ (179). In this sense Frow argues that Leo Bersani is only partially correct when he observes that voice is the mechanism that ‘binds-in’ the reader or spectator to a fictional discourse, ‘that incessant *voice* which, in poetry, prose fiction and the essay, never stops implying the presence of a stable and structured self as the centre to which the world always returns and from which it receives its own reassuringly stable designs’ (258). The other part of this equation is, Frow insists, that ‘no subject position can ever be single and univocal, particularly in the temporal extension of language’ (180).

Steven Connor in his landmark study of ventriloquism, *Dumbstruck* (2000), takes up these intertwined questions of voice, subjectivity and mediation in a very different historical and cultural context. Connor begins his expansive study of the disembodied voice, which ranges from ventriloquism to spiritualism and the occult to automata and the gramophone, with the following premise: ‘my voice is not something that I merely have, or even something that I, if only in part, am. Rather, it is something that I do. A voice is not a condition, nor yet an attribute, but an event. It is less something that exists than something which occurs’ (4). Voice, in this sense, is a fundamentally split condition, which was palpably materialised during the period around the invention of the phonograph and gramophone covered by Connor’s study, a time which multiplied the transmission and reception of voices at a

distance, producing ‘new configurations of the imaginary space of the body and the socio-cultural spaces of its utterance’ (13). It is this new media environment that shaped Rosa Praed’s understanding of the convergence between aesthetic, technological and spiritual mediation, which Jessica White explores in her essay in this issue. The uncanny acoustics of Praed’s prose, as White argues, opens up an incommensurable space between past and present, and between one mind and another, that can only be temporarily appeased by the mediation of the voices of the dead, a telepathic summoning of loved ones that both consoles and alienates characters, such as Esther, whose fear of the Australian bush is only partially dispelled by the appearance of her dead mother in *An Australian Heroine*.

So far our discussion has focused on the complexities opened by the literary (and musico-literary) voice. The space opened by sound is implicit to these theorisations, particularly as it arises from Steven Connor’s discussion of the movement of the voice in relation to the speaker. Jean-Luc Nancy, in the context of his ontological treatise on sound and listening, calls this movement of sound through space ‘the referral’: ‘meaning and sound share the space of a referral, in which at the same time they refer to each other, and that, in a very general way, this space can be defined as the space of a self, a subject’ (8). This passage of sonorous transit, and the interior/exterior relationship it describes, is also at the foundations of Barry Truax’s definition of the soundscape: ‘[a]n environment of sound (sonic environment) with emphasis on the way it is perceived and understood by the individual, or by society. It thus depends on the relationship between the individual and any such environment’ (126). Extending the conceptual work begun by R. Murray Schafer, Truax emphasises the relation between sound and the listener—a point fundamental to Nancy’s project in *Listening* – and it is this space of resonance that both echoes, and is productive of, the range of historical and literary moments encountered by the works under consideration in this issue.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s concept of ‘the refrain’, from their well-known work *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) offers a compelling theorisation of the organisation of space through sound that builds upon the sonorous relationality discussed by Schafer, Truax and Nancy. Initially using the example of a child singing a song to calm himself— ‘A child in the dark, gripped with fear, comforts himself by singing under his breath (343)—Deleuze and Guattari describe the refrain as three connected stages of territory formation—from chaos, to the formation of a home space, to the ‘line of flight’ into a new territory (343): ‘The role of the refrain has often been emphasised: it is territorial, a territorial assemblage. Bird songs: the bird sings to mark its territory’ (344). While much of their discussion is focused on bird behaviour and art music, Deleuze and Guattari assure us that ‘[t]he refrain may assume other functions, amorous, professional or social, liturgical or cosmic: it always carries earth with it...’ (344). In his essay in this issue Joseph Cummins mobilises the refrain in a discussion of sound technology, popular music and identity formation in Christos Tsiolkas’s *Loaded* (1995). Thinking through the form of the refrain allows Cummins to trace the stylisation of movement, flows of energy and creation of different interiors, mental and physical. Highlighting the rhythmic, affective and spatial labour of sound, the refrain provides a useful entry point into the woven articulations of Australian colonial and postcolonial space under critique here, particularly the contributions from Cummins and Stephen Harris, which both, in different ways, focus on the relation between structured forms of sound – songs – and the remapping of Australian spaces.

The most recent critical intervention into the field of Australian focused sound studies is Joy Damousi and Desley Deacon’s *Talking and Listening: the age of modernity* (2007), a volume

that, working between the fields of history, literary studies and linguistics, tracks a range of sonic concerns, including the role of sound technologies like the radio in the formation of national space, and the development of an Australian accent. The historically framed articles collected by Damousi and Deacon follow the critical thrust of Paul Carter's influential reappraisal of Australian space in his 'spatial essay' *The Road to Botany Bay* (1987), a study that presented a complex analysis of how colonial space was created through the poetics of place naming and mapping, critical ground also explored by Simon Ryan in *The Cartographic Imagination* (1996). Carter has continued to investigate the formation of Australian space, often taking into consideration sound, in such works as *The Sound in Between: Voice, Space, Performance* (1992), *The Lie of the Land* (1996), and *Ground Truthing* (2010). *The Sound in Between*, which encounters a range of historical, literary and theatrical sources, theorises the frontier meeting-through-sound of Indigenous Australians and European settlers. Carter's discussion of the confusion surrounding the greeting 'coo-ee' overlaps nicely with the theoretical territory of Truax and Nancy:

We extend a sound in order to define an interval, to assure those already here that we have the measure of them – that in the mere mimetic exchange of sounds which precedes trading in metaphors, swapping unlike for unlike, we are looking to give our movements human rhythm and reference. To sound the space is to denominate it a place: it is to mark it as a historical event. (12)

Carter's call to 'augment the eye with the ear' (21), in acknowledging the colonial histories mapped out in his earlier work – sums up the critique carried out by the essays in this issue. In particular, Stephen Harris's discussion of the relationship between people, sound and the Australian landscape in Tim Winton's *Dirt Music* (2002) continues the investigation into the sound of Australian space initiated in Carter's diverse research *oeuvre*.

While our discussion has so far been immersed in theorisations of the voice, noise, and the formation of space through sound, Anthony Uhlmann and Nicholas Kankaheinen's essays both tackle the complex relationship between sound and silence, Uhlmann with a close analysis of idiosyncratic novelist Gerald Murnane's *A Thousand Windows* and Kankaheinen in a discussion of one of Australia's most important poetic voices, Judith Wright. These two figures at once occupy distinct planes in the Australian literary pantheon, and, heeding Lefebvre's call to 'listen to silences', the essays by Uhlmann and Kankaheinen create a unique link between Murnane and Wright, founded in silence, that in turn deepens our understanding of this type of resonance in the Australian context. The foundations of this tradition of Australian silence can be traced back to the influential writings of Judge Advocate David Collins, in his *Account of the English Colony of New South Wales* (1804). Describing the landing of the First Fleet at Sydney Cove, Collins wrote:

The spot chosen...was at the head of a Cove near a run of fresh water, which stole silently through a very thick wood, the stillness of which had then, for the first time since the creation, been interrupted by the rude sound of the labourer's axe, and the downfall of its ancient inhabitants: a stillness and tranquillity which, from that day, were to give place to the noise of labour, the confusion of camps and towns, and the busy hum of its new possessors...(10)

In setting up the racist power structures and ways of reading and hearing Australia and its First People, this famous passage—recently addressed by Peter Denney (2012), who provides a close analysis of Collins's account—initiates the post-contact silencing of Indigenous

Australia. Echoing the phrase coined by W. E. H. Stanner in his 1968 Boyer lectures, Jane Belfrage's essay 'The Great Australian Silence' provides a valuable sound-sensitive account of this silencing. Measuring the devastating impact of colonial domination on the diversity of Indigenous knowledge systems and artistic practices, Belfrage describes how '[f]oreign, 'deaf', visually-oriented knowledge practices of hand-written and printed texts usurped sovereignty in the knowledge soundscapes of the land' (2). Several important reclamations of this 'usurped sovereignty' have emerged in recent years: the prodigiously sonic novels of Indigenous writer Alexis Wright, in particular her noisy masterpiece *Carpentaria* (2006), and Roslyn Haynes' *Seeking the Centre* (1998), which traces Indigenous and non-Indigenous literary and artistic production in relation to the influential geoimaginary of the Australian desert centre.

The essays collected in this issue of JASAL use sound in unique and innovative ways, often challenging the sonic stereotypes recorded by the canonical soundscapes of Australian literary history, like Marcus Clarke's melancholic rendition of the Australian bush in his well-known *Preface to the Poems of Adam Lindsay Gordon* (1876), or the 'cold and loud' (1) sound of Stan Parker's settler axe resounding through the opening scene of Patrick White's mythopoeic masterpiece *The Tree of Man*. If the stormy resonance and contemporary song-lines of Wright's *Carpentaria* map a way forward into the future of Australian literary soundings, the essays collected here follow the reconstructive imperative of that novel, registering the unique vocal, spatial and historical harmonics of a variety of literary productions.

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