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# THE FACT OF RESONANCE: AN ACOUSTICS OF DETERMINATION IN FAULKNER AND BENJAMIN<sup>1</sup>

JULIE BETH NAPOLIN

*So that at last, as though out of some trivial and unimportant region beyond even distance, the sound of it seems to come slow and terrific and without meaning, as though it were a ghost travelling a half mile ahead of its own shape. "That far within my hearing before my seeing," Lena thinks.*

— William Faulkner (1990a, 5-6)

## Counter-Factual Listening

*The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth. For suffering is objectivity that weighs on the subject; its most subjective experience, its expression, is objectively conveyed.*

— Theodor Adorno (2004, 18-19)

In 1932, Walter Benjamin gave a radio address, one of hundreds, on the Mississippi Flood of 1927. The flood would continually resurge in William Faulkner's world, often in displaced form, as grieving brothers confront a river that washed away the bridge, talking "up to us in a murmur become ceaseless and myriad," stealing away Addie's coffin in *As I Lay Dying* (Faulkner

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<sup>1</sup>This article is excerpted from my book-in-progress, *The Fact of Resonance*, which explores the materiality of listening in Conrad and Faulkner. Portions of this essay were presented at "Fifty Years after Faulkner: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference," University of Mississippi, July 2012, in the Department of English at University of Mississippi, February 2015, and at The Graduate Institute for Design, Ethnography and Social Thought, The New School, March 2015. I am grateful for additional comments from Jay Watson, Gustavus Stadler, Christopher Miller, Marta Figlerowicz, Amy Cimini, and Clara Latham.

1985, 141).<sup>2</sup> The Mississippi, says Benjamin, “is continuously moving: not only its waters, flowing from source to mouth, but also its banks, which are forever changing” (2014, 176). The Mississippi is one way to re-imagine the “mouth to mouth” tales that would preoccupy him in “The Storyteller,” but also Faulkner’s way of writing that developed out of memories of listening in childhood. As Faulkner once said, “I put down what the voices say, and it’s right” (qtd. in Cowley 1966, 114).<sup>3</sup>

If the task of the novel as form for Faulkner was found to represent something of reality, it was a counter-factual history of listening. Faulkner’s propagative technique of working with voices and sonorities continually indicates the social and historical constraints of physical perception in the present, but also the possibility that perception, the forms of recognition and intimacy it admits, might become otherwise. Faulknerian listening demands that we expand the technical sense of recording to include the act of perception itself.

In a postscript to among his last letters to Adorno sent from his flat in Paris in 1940, Benjamin asks if he has read Faulkner whose *Lumière d’août* (*Light in August* [1932]) Benjamin had lately been reading.<sup>4</sup> This postscript gestures to the lost possibility of an essay on Faulkner never written, a reverberation. Benjamin would commit suicide at the border of Spain. One shudders at Quentin’s suicide in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), his “fragile body” beneath an “unfamiliar sky,” phrases that begin Benjamin’s “The Storyteller” (1968, 83). Quentin will not live to see the First World War that shapes Benjamin’s critique of the age of information. Men return from the front shattered and mute, without experiences that can be translated into stories that are by nature for Benjamin “germinative.” In their ambiguity, stories release their affective potency after a long time. Information and the facts it transmits travel without “losing any time.”

By 1950 there was still no radio at Rowan Oak, and Faulkner would allow his daughter Jill to play the phonograph only when he was out. The owner of a local restaurant unplugged the jukebox when Faulkner dined. Yoknapatawpha would appear to be a reaction formation to his own music-saturated environs of Mississippi. Though Jill could not play her phonograph within his earshot, Faulkner wore out the grooves of “Rhapsody in Blue” while composing *Sanctuary* (1931), a novel underwritten by the mournful presence of gramophones and radios competing for attention. Faulkner once complained about a radio playing in a pharmacy: “it looks like all the people of this world must have a lot of noise around them to keep them

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<sup>2</sup>I do not mean to suggest that the actual Flood washed out the bridge, as it did not move far enough east to impact the region depicted by the novel. For a remarkable account of the Flood as allegorized by the weather of *As I Lay Dying*, see Parish (2015).

<sup>3</sup>Stephen M. Ross seminally details Faulkner’s biographical relationship to orality and vocality in Ross (1991).

<sup>4</sup>Benjamin could also read a bit of English by this time, having taken some lessons. In 1935, Maurice Cointreau translated *Light in August* into French.

from thinking about things they should remember" (qtd. in Lester 2002, 163). There was an object he wished to hold at bay while also holding close. Cheryl Lester has argued that cultural concerns marked Faulkner's perturbation by recorded music, a rapidly expanding industry based upon African American migration and the Lomax field recordings as they spread blues and oral forms beyond the Delta: "In the segregated South, vigilant protection of the racialized dimension of public space would have to have been troubled by a new cultural form that evaded old rules and regulations for maintaining, among others, racial and class distinctions" (2002, 163). Faulkner's "allergy to...media...emphasizes the limits of his insights into the material conditions of his own time and place" (Lester 2002, 163).

Faulkner anxiously confronted the division between public and private, sequestering remembering, but also composition, as an auditory experience. Faulkner's biographical perturbation by recorded sound circles around a sensory set of conditions, which, if marked by racial and class distinctions in his civic life, return in Faulkner's narrative acts of audition to deregulate those same distinctions and the boundaries of interiority as the vexed site of cultural memory and consciousness.

In reading *Light in August*, Benjamin had likely recognized a dialectical narrative aesthetic, every present action being premised upon a slow backward turn to an extensive account of the past. The novel's durative effect is at the level of the sentence and its many voices in their serial presentation. In the novel's opening in *medias res*, Lena is traveling from Alabama on foot in search of the lover and father of her child who has abandoned her; Lena fantasizes that he is down the road. "Behind her the four weeks, ... peopled with kind and nameless faces and voices. *Lucas Burch? ...I don't know of anybody by that name around here. This road? He might be there. It's possible...* backrolling now behind her a long monotonous succession of peaceful and undeviating changes from day to dark and dark to day again, through which she advanced" (Faulkner 1990a, 6). To say this sentence aloud would involve continually modulating once voice to intimate the many. Unattributed and anonymous voices, somewhere between echo, anticipation, and fantasy, repeat and move forward in the ear of Lena. What is most private—the inner voice of Lena—holds the town voices of others across distance, which fuse themselves to a free indirect discourse, both intimate and populated.<sup>5</sup>

Faulkner's project in *Light in August* was not purely perceptual, but also social and historical. Two competing narratives slowly intertwine over the course of the novel, the second being the story of Joe Christmas, a man who believes himself to be bi-racial (no omniscient narrator will intervene to indicate the factual truth). The story of Lena was only added later in the revision process. Joe and Lena will live in the same town, and he will work in the same mill as the man who will court Lena. Faulkner begins with Lena, only to turn to the story of Joe, among the most searching depictions of

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<sup>5</sup>For a foundational account of psychic voice in *Light in August*, also see Ross (1991, 130-183).

racialization in American literature. After Joe murders his lover, a middle-aged white woman, the sheriff speculates that she had sanctioned black men living with her. He then questions a black man living near by: "It was as if all their individual five senses had become one organ of looking, like an apotheosis, the words that flew among them wind—or airengendered. *Is that him? Is that the one that did it? Sheriff's got him. Sheriff has already caught him*" (Faulkner 1990a, 291). In being lynched, Joe will become nominalized as black in collective memory, though the narrator will never confirm or deny his racial identity. Faulkner ends the novel in a curious turn by leaving the story with two completely new characters gossiping over the event and inevitably substantializing as fact what was never evidenced. These airengendered voices belong to everyone and no one, choric and collective, anonymous and contagious. Determinate, they both receive and contribute to a local air that conditions the very possibility of story, articulation, and voice.

In a highly analogous moment of his 1932 radio address, made before Faulkner had yet come into his view, Benjamin recites at length the testimony of one survivor, a farmer, who had witnessed his two brothers drift away in the Flood. Benjamin then speaks in the voice of the survivor. Here, one gleans a fundamental quality of the nature of the story as a medium of aural memory: depersonalization, becoming someone else, being-inhabited by lost voices as a condition of having a voice in the present. The voice of the survivor is one in which Benjamin will never speak as himself. One wonders how he might have inflected his voice, in German, to capture the Mississippian. "From far off we could hear the rushing of the water. The sound of collapsing houses had ceased. It was like a shipwreck in the middle of the ocean, thousands of miles from the shore. 'We're drifting,' murmured John'" (Benjamin 2014, 178). The brothers then bid "farewell." No recordings of Benjamin's broadcasts have been preserved, lending them the melancholy tinge of what Lecia Rosenthal calls the "dispersal and loss associated with the auditory object more generally" (2014, xi). Benjamin ends with a warning to Germans of the dangers of the Ku Klux Klan and their violence, a haunting echo of what is to come.

The contrast between storytelling and the novel is not that one is spoken and immediate and the other written and at a distance, a common misunderstanding of Benjamin's "The Storyteller." He does not pose a dyad of "the realm of living speech" and its others, the novel and information. Rather, his argument, made largely by way of suggestion as it incants the form of memory whose loss he mourns, concerns a mode of reception that is coming to an end (Nikolai Leskov being for him a border figure—Faulkner, too, would have met this criterion). The oral story and the modern novel imply two diverging, but historically necessary forms of memory or ways of regarding the remembered object. In its origin, epic memory was divided in its principle as "remembrance" and "reminiscence." Remembrance, the form of epic of memory from which the novel is descended, depicts one person in a progressive journey and concludes; there can be no ambiguity and it

is didactic. Paradoxically, it is this form of memory from which information, which begins his essay in a critique of mechanical reproducibility, is descended. Information is not a purely technological phenomenon in this regard. Remembrance in epic is “dedicated to one hero, one odyssey, one battle” (Benjamin 1968, 98). Benjamin pairs this dedication with a second mood, reminiscence and its “many diffuse occurrences.” There is a mode of memory that reiterates and another that seals, one that is to be continued (both in telling and in the lived experience of the listener) or gives “counsel” (*Rat*), and another that concludes or completes. The novel, as descended from epic remembrance, speaks to a “profound perplexity,” or what is better translated as counselessness (*tiefe Ratslosigkeit*), because it speaks to a lack of “continuation” (*Fortsetzung*), suggestive of that which is continually situated, or on and on from before (Benjamin 1968, 86).

I emphasize this translation because a lack of counsel does not place the condition of perplexity solely within the subject or object of experience. Counselessness lies in the historical conjuncture of experience, narrative, reception, and transmission. To be sure, Benjamin, like Faulkner, laments that stories are no longer to be continued, a limitation in lived experience, as it might become an object of narrative. Yet, experience must here be defined in resonant terms as propagation, as that in which the stories of one live on as counsel for the other. As I will return to, Benjamin and Faulkner trans-locate this germination within the most brute materiality of listening. Though Benjamin adopts the medium of radio to transmit the story of the brothers, in this and in other radio pieces (in particular, those meant for children) it is clear that he has in mind a conjuncture and with it, a slow, delayed release of affective potency, as in a memory of something once overheard without full understanding. This dimension of hearing, a hearing that is to come, will be crucial to an account of the politics of listening in Faulkner, the very fold between now and to come that defines the missed encounter and resonance as action at a distance.

One can imagine Benjamin reciting the farmer’s testimony in the kind of vocal ventriloquy that would later characterize Quentin’s storytelling in chapter seven of *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), a fugue-like novel published in the same year as “The Storyteller.” A series of voices within voices will narrate a history of familial violence as incited by a dynastic Plantation owner, Thomas Sutpen, in the antebellum South. Faulkner turns his attention to what has been lost to the historical present of Jim Crow, missed chances for feeling amongst black and white brothers and sisters who, at the dawning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, cannot fully acknowledge their own blood relation. The central crux of the storytelling voices in 1909 is an account of why Henry Sutpen shot his closest friend, Charles Bon, at the threshold of Sutpen’s Hundred at the end of the Civil War. This murder, we only later discover, was against the threat of incest (Bon is his half-brother and intends to marry their sister Judith), but the threat of miscegenation (Bon is the partially black child of Sutpen’s first marriage in Haiti). The echo of the shot is said to hang in the air of Jefferson

for forty-three years. An experience of the sound reaches Quentin through the account of Rosa Coldfield, the novel's first narrator and one of few living witnesses of the Civil War, in the narrating present of 1909.

This air, we will find, is thoroughly mediatised via Faulkner's moment of writing,<sup>6</sup> transmitting sounds and voices across unnatural distances. They are unnatural distances because they are the only way to represent what is always untimely in listening. In tracing sound technology's impact on literature, discussions of the disembodied separation of sound from image tend towards neutralizing the affective dimension of sound and the concomitant problem of memory, historicity and collective determination. To be sure, the echo of the shot that kills Bon is an acousmatic sound, or a sound whose source is not seen.<sup>7</sup> But resonance – the echo of the shot – structures the temporal layers of Faulkner's novel between 1833, 1909, and 1936, also moving between bodies, memories, and selves in what I will describe as transempodiment. Were Bon's racial identity and familial heredity not under question, the sound would have been sealed and forgotten long ago. Miscegenation and interracial desire, as it has structured the Sutpen family, is the foundational and collective repression of the world of *Absalom*. It will also determine the way voices apprehend the past through an ever-moving circumlocution – it takes nearly the entire novel to state the fact of Bon's racial heredity directly. Such identity nonetheless remains penumbral. Quentin and Shreve's rehearsal of the story in Cambridge, decades after the Civil War, slowly compounds a first version rife with occlusions, as told by Rosa one stifling hot summer afternoon in Mississippi earlier that year. That indirection drives the shape of the narrative forward, and with it a series of residual sounds more powerful in their echo. "I heard an echo, but not the shot," Rosa will repeatedly say (Faulkner 1990b, 121). "I saw a closed door, but did not enter it," a door beyond which laid Bon's unseen corpse.

Faulkner revised the final chapters, most remembered for the narrator dissolving into a series of laconic, script-like voices, during what Sarah Gleeson-White has recovered as an astonishing period of engagement with the cinematic sound techniques of Sergei Eisenstein, also a shared reference for Benjamin.<sup>8</sup> But a problematic relation between bodies, voices, and sounds drives the entirety of the novel. In chapter 7, Quentin will suddenly lend his

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<sup>6</sup>A number of recent works have argued for Faulkner's investments in audio technology. See Napolin (2016), Murphet (2015), and Smith (2012).

<sup>7</sup>Among the most important discussions of acousmatic listening is to be found in the work of Chion (1999). For a crucial history and theory of acousmatic listening see Brian Kane (2014).

<sup>8</sup>See Sarah Gleeson-White (2013, 87-100). This essay squarely locates *Absalom* within the history of experimental sound cinema via Faulkner's film treatment for "Sutter's Gold," Faulkner having studied Eisenstein's own treatment for the story that favored an asynchronous approach to sound. Gleeson-White argues for the "disembodied" effect of Russian sound technique, and under its influence, a new "auditory Faulkner." Also see Watson (2015). These essays brilliantly trace Faulkner's borrowing from sound cinema, while also emphasizing the disjuncture between sound and image. My interest will instead lie in the historically material dimension of Eisenstein's theory.

voice to a child Sutpen, becoming its medium, articulating his missing story of childhood anguish that humanizes the demon and speaks its suppressed truth. An anonymous narrating entity frames these fugues in ways that overhear characters' speech while also registering what they have not yet said—or cannot yet say—to themselves. This narrative entity in *Absalom* is not omniscient, and it adheres to a strict boundary between *physis* and *psyche*, yet partakes of both. Though it accesses interior life, the narrator does not intervene fully within characters' private thoughts. Its mode of hearing retains what has been lost to characters' cognition but nonetheless conditions the possibility of affective encounter in the present—that which cannot be registered in the moment, only recorded. Faulknerian air—what I will call after his lexicon “circumambience”—is a sensible medium of sound and voice that is not outside of the question concerning mechanical reproduction and its meaning for the politics of perception. Circumambience is neither the presence of an otherwise repressed technological apparatus nor a pre-technological and natural medium.<sup>9</sup> Air is historically conditioned, allowing Faulkner to register historical listening, or “the long silence of notpeople in notlanguage” that, in its negativity, is irreducible to the apparatus (Faulkner 1990b, 5). Air is the point of contact between historicity and contingency. Atmospheric listening is a historical and diffusive mode of attentiveness rather than a failure or lack of coherence in the object.

Faulkner can be retrieved within the history of dialectical aesthetics through his relationship to sound and sound media, but beyond the polemic that also frames dyadic receptions of Benjamin and Adorno's exchanges on mechanical reproducibility. To isolate the auditory and technical object of loss is not yet to speak of the problem of voicing and sounding, their shared modes of loss and dispersal, and with it, uncanny and at times merely acoustical retrievals. There are sounds and voices that belong to experiences that have not happened in a full or real way. Who or what will redeem lost chances for recognition are not determined in advance by the object to which negative moments inhere. Counter-factual listening is a fact of resonance: there is the inheritance of airendered words and sounds that record and broadcast local knowledge to define the social realm and its constitutive exclusions.

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<sup>9</sup>For one of few accounts of natural sound in Faulkner, see Zender (1984).



## *The Acoustical Unconscious*

*Music is a critique of phenomenality, of the appearance that the substance is present here and now.*

—Theodor Adorno

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility” (1935), it is well known that Benjamin praises a newly visible “optical unconscious” as it was made possible by photography and cinema. Cinema is what Eisenstein calls “an instrument of perception” (1977, 70), a description that would also shape Benjamin’s optical thought. Yet, the sense of cinema as an instrument of perception motivates the most neglected – because material yet invisible – acoustical component of Eisenstein’s dialectical theory of perception: what is sensed, but not yet fully felt, and thus given over to residual effects in what Eisenstein named “overtone montage.” Faulkner was perhaps not unaware of Eisenstein’s larger four-part taxonomy of montage (rhythmic, metrical, tonal, overtone), the notion of overtone montage also circulating amongst his literary contemporaries in 1920s Britain.<sup>10</sup>

Eisenstein turned to the acoustical perception of music, but in order to analogize an affective and material dimension of cinematic vision.<sup>11</sup> “In music this [dimension] is explained by the fact that, from the moment that overtones can be heard parallel with the basic sound, there also can be sensed vibrations, oscillations that cease to impress as tones, but rather as purely physical displacements of the perceived impression” (Eisenstein 1977, 80).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>“The Fourth Dimension of the Kino” appeared in Russian in 1929, amongst the last years of “free” modernism when it would have been quickly translated into German, French, and English and disseminated. For an informative account that places overtone montage within the tide of British modernism, see Maclean (2015).

<sup>11</sup>While it is beyond the scope of this present essay, it is important to note that in a 1938 letter responding to Adorno’s “The Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Listening,” Benjamin acknowledges his interest in Adorno’s notion of the “acoustic perception of jazz” (Adorno and Benjamin 1999, 295). Benjamin continues: “I do not mean to suggest that acoustic and optical perception are equally susceptible to revolutionary transformation. This may explain the fact that the prospect of a quite different way of listening (*abschließende Perspektive eines umspringenden Hörens*) with which you conclude your essay, is not immediately clear, as least to someone like me, for whom Mahler is not a completely intelligible experience” (Ibid). Benjamin’s neologism “*eines umspringenden Hörens*” is without direct English translation. It has been translated as “quite a different way of listening,” showing the degree to which it is unheard-of for our auditory lexicon. Alternating, leaping or jumping around: what is such a listening? There is nothing in the passage to say “prospect” of such a listening, as it translated, but to be sure, the tone of the sentence remains futural. Benjamin perhaps senses that Adorno concludes his essay with a gesture towards a way of listening that is not yet formalized. For a different reading of this passage see Ryder (2007). Ryder also finds this discussion to be compelling evidence for Benjamin’s latent theory of an acoustical unconscious, which is the topic of his book-in-progress, *Hearing Otherwise: The Acoustical Unconscious from Walter Benjamin to Alexander Kluge* (Northwestern UP, forthcoming).

<sup>12</sup>The discovery of the overtone series (1701) was radical for our understanding of pitch. These partial tones can be isolated in different ways, such as through the natural harmonics of

It is as if there is no distinction between mediated and unmediated perception at a brute level. More precisely, technologically mediated vision closely approximates unmediated acoustical perception. The visual overtone, Eisenstein describes, cannot be found by looking at the composition of the shot; it is not “in” the frame on the visible level. It is an affective after-effect of structure. The metaphor of music in Eisenstein ceases to be pure metaphor as he reduces the occult “fourth dimension” of cinema—the unsubstantial yet palpable affective atmosphere between spectator and screen—to a set of “collateral vibrations” or secondary stimuli (1977, 66). The overtone series clings to every fundamental (or “dominant” as Eisenstein calls it), which is not heard without being subtended by the semi-audible or the nearly unheard.

Partial tones are an organizing and primary displacement within sound; they allow for the very perception of pitch. They can become more audible in decay or upon repeated listening. But overtones are nonetheless immediately immanent to and constitutive of any fundamental. Even when speaking of an unmediated auditory event, then, delay is built into acoustical experience. There are distances within the single sound event, just as pitch content is essentially and infinitely composite and in surplus of its fundamental, readily-perceived identity that gives each note its name.

It is impossible to say whether Faulkner was aware of Eisenstein’s theory of overtone montage. Yet, an understanding of the dialectical temporality of an acoustical substratum places Faulknerian acoustics within its aesthetic history.<sup>13</sup> In what follows, we will be somewhere beyond the counterpointal forms of collage that dominate the critical reception of Eisensteinian montage. The overtone is not without material counterpoint in its compositeness and oscillation. There is a gap between hearing and understanding, but also between hearing and itself.

In *Absalom*, Rosa continually indicates that she knows more of Bon’s racial identity and desires more of his body than she will ever directly assert. Rosa has very little by which to organize her own belated sexual awakening, foreclosed before fully articulated or embraced. Fantasy intervenes before an understanding that comes too late. Her sense of knowing and desiring has been structured by acts of residual hearing, “that unrational hearing-sense” (Faulkner 1990b, 116). She learned everything she knows in her “Cassandra-like listening beyond closed doors (1990b, 47). Here, philosopher Mladen Dolar’s pivotal account of overhearing in relation the drive is instructive: “The time between hearing and understanding is precisely the time of construction of fantasies, desires, symptoms, all the basic structures which underlie and organize the vast ramifications of human enjoyment” (2006, 137). This “temporal vector” between the inconceivable and its belated rationalization

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stringed instruments, and in certain kinds of spaces with different acoustical properties. I am grateful to Amy Cimini for discussions regarding this phenomenon.

<sup>13</sup>Faulkner often turned to the temporality of musical listening to analogize the act of reading. The narrator of *Absalom* remarks that music and a printed tale share “a formal recognition of an acceptance of elapsed and yet-elapsing time” (1990b, 15).

cannot be sealed; fantasy remains as their “junction” and is the basis of the whole of sexual life (2006, 137-138).<sup>14</sup>

There are limits to this account. Faulkner’s art lies in the historical-collective determination of such scenes and their unrationalized content. Repression cannot compass the unbound potentiality that predates and depersonalizes individual life. What Rosa names “*the circumambient air*” (Faulkner 1990b, 119) qualifies, determines, and accompanies instances of desire and violence across Yoknapatawpha. But residual air also accompanies and circulates the material reality of feeling beyond its rightful and individualized moment. These two conflicting yet co-constitutive impulses make up the circumambience of *Absalom* as well as the wider acoustical field and genealogy it inhabits and announces.

These are unsanctioned, erotic events of overhearing – hearing too much, hearing just beyond what can be acoustically and socially heard, as in the “*dim upper hallway where an echo spoke which was not mine but rather that of the lost irrevocable might-have-been that haunts all houses*” (1990b, 109). Here, in chapter five, the novel doubles back to Rosa’s room where the novel first began. But she now speaks in a new voice rendered in italics; it is among the most enigmatic voices in the history of literature, being what Nietzsche might punningly call “unheard of.” It is the form of inaudible content; it finds its ground in residual auditory acts. For Judith never says Bon’s racial identity out loud. As with Clytie, a bi-racial child of Sutpen and an unnamed slave concubine, Bon’s racial and hereditary status is communicated in delayed ways that “*strike the resonant strings of remembering*” (1990b, 172), indicating not an individual but historical substratum. New words fuse with old ones in the resonant penumbra of cognition.

In “News of a Death” (1932-34), Benjamin had explored this possibility and questioned the phenomenon of acoustical *déjà vu*, suggesting instead an acoustical unconscious, an incomplete counterpart to his optical theory that nonetheless resounds across his writings and fragments.<sup>15</sup> “Shouldn’t we rather speak of events which affect us like an echo—one awakened by a sound that seems to have issued from somewhere in the darkness of past life?” (Benjamin 2006, 129). There is a fold between matter and metaphor: these events affect us “like” an echo, yet they are also awakened “by” a sound. Here, as with Eisenstein, it is difficult to discern whether the

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<sup>14</sup>Also see Brian Kane’s critique of an impossible “dis-acousmatization” of the psychoanalyst’s voice that, for Dolar, stands in for the drive. Kane’s critique is on the grounds that psychoanalysis is a technique, one that demands fidelity and faith (2014, 222). I would insist that even demystification of such technique would remain without positive knowledge in its historical determination. Both Kane and Dolar’s scenes are fundamentally defined by the immediate scope of the individual psyche.

<sup>15</sup>Ryder locates in Benjamin’s overlooked regard for sounds the features of the dialectic, sounds as they both register the past and anticipate the future, what Ryder suggestively calls “*déjà entendu*” (2007, 141). My account here instead focuses on the possibility of socially unconscious sounds whose dialectic exceeds personal memory. This possibility must be extrapolated from and related to Benjamin’s views on storytelling as a depersonalized and socio-historical act.

acoustical component is material or figural, belonging to their fold. This fold is introduced by what has not happened in a full or complete way, what remains without positive knowledge.<sup>16</sup> The fold designates what is not fully recoverable through narrative, as if sounds were its shard.

Are not these subjective sounds paradoxically received in primary ways as echoes? They give consciousness the sense that an indeterminate determination predates it and has been there before thinking, rather than being its secondary displacement. There are, then, sounds that while ignored or misapprehended have not gone unrecorded by the perceiver. At issue in the optical unconscious is not how one perceives “more” from or “closer” to an object of perception. *An object does not arrive in conscious life without having passed through a number of displacements.* The acoustical unconscious is not a site of storage: it is a site, without location, of material transfiguration. There are acts of listening that are deferred because they are partial. They stand in relation to an object that cannot be registered, only overtonally recorded. As I have already suggested with the delayed naming that gives to Bon his “blackness,” *this passage is the object*, its being-as-resonance, rather than a primary object that resonates in secondary ways. The physical and dialectical features of an acoustical unconscious turn upon residual listening, but in advance of listening as a personal event.

At a certain point late in the novel, *Absalom* transcribes a yellowed letter to Judith from the war front, one of few material fragments. Bon writes to her of the shots that began the war, echoing in advance the violent yet more private sound of the shot that will later kill him: “*there was that one fusillade four years ago which sounded once and then was arrested, ...and never repeated and it now only the loud aghast echo...which lies over the land where that fusillade first sounded and where it must remain yet because no other space under heaven will receive it*” (*Absalom* 104). It is circulatory and waiting in relationship to perception; it is addressed to an audition that is not yet. The echo over the land awaits belated historical and political recognition by the cognizant.

Faulkner’s circumambience captures a set of sounds that are transgenerationally perceived. Sounding is not simply a rationalist problem of whether the quality of emotion inheres to an object as a primary quality, as if there is an autonomous object; nor can the autonomy of the aural object simply wrest sound from longstanding musical discourses by which emotion is thought to inhere to tonality as quality. This is a false dilemma in Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha, false because ahistorical, while also unwilling to trace the airy lines of feeling that appear only to disappear, what is sensed, but not yet fully thought. To remember is to recite and reproduce. But if

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<sup>16</sup>Benjamin also notes a “strange” theoretical gap: no one has asked after words, but also sounds (rustling, knocking) that point to “that invisible stranger—the future—which forgot them at our place” (Benjamin 2006, 129-130). The dialectic, then, would not simply recover, but proleptically indicate a future that is paradoxically experienced through the affect of having forgotten something, as in “I feel I’ve forgotten something, but I don’t know what.”

the remembered object resists narration, then disappearance paradoxically coheres its concrete reality.

### *Circumambience: Air's Archive*

*[T]he conjunction of reproduction and disappearance is performance's condition of possibility, its ontology and its mode of production.*

—Fred Moten

At the beginning of chapter two in *Absalom*, Quentin sits on the porch with his father when he will wait for it to become dark enough to return to Rosa's office. He is about to be submitted to Father's unrelenting voice that will deliver a series of partial truths about the Sutpens. The narrator first notes a residual air:

It was a day of listening too—the listening, the hearing in 1909 even yet mostly that which he already knew since he had been born in and still breathed the same air in which the church bells rung on that Sunday morning in 1833 (and, on Sundays, heard even one of the original three bells in the same steeple where descendants of the same pigeons strutted and crooned or wheeled in short courses resembling soft fluid paint smears on the soft summer sky);—a Sunday morning in June with the bells ringing peaceful and peremptory and a little cacophonous—the denominations in concord though not in tune... (Faulkner 1990b, 23)

The "circumambient air" is the same between 1833 and 1909, a material continuity of the place in which they listen—an impossible sound recorded and transmitted by air. While recording technology nowhere appears in the novel, nor could it in the events during the Civil War, the bells and the echo of the shot are more mechanical than naturally vibrating. In this vibration, the point of vision and audition has been desubjectivized. The sounds of bells, outside of human audition, register what men cannot. Village bells, Alain Corbin writes, once defined "a space with real perceptible limits" (Corbin 1998, 97). They left "no fragments of isolated space in which the auditory identity was ill-defined," registering a localism, the "peace of near, well defined horizons." Here, however, one senses a fragment that requires several generations to resound. There is a chord between two times and places, struck by the capacity of mechanically reproduced sound to continue to repeat beyond its original moment. This passage is radiophonic in relation to space, sound being broadcast across distance. But the distance is within the seemingly self-coincidental location. The detuning of the bells in the lapse of time is the only indication that the sound is fundamentally discontinuous in relation to 1833 and 1909—the sound is not the same, though it

is reiterative. The frustrating grammar of the narrative works towards, but cannot complete, re-substantiation (there being no subject position to receive it). At times, the narrator of *Absalom* notes the subject of the sentence in parenthesis – “he (Quentin)” – in part because narrative has put the subject as a coherent substance into question. The subject moves into an insubstantial yet material space held by the parenthesis, a space also anonymous because the subject of the verb’s mode of action has *taken leave*.

Who hears? There is an atmospherics of the past, one that haunts the written word as it struggles to predicate its own subject. The act of hearing that registers the bells exceeds the physical capacity of audition only if that act is understood as contemporaneous and identical with itself (to hear is here and now). An immanent object of sound moves the prose forward: suddenly, the past tense (“heard”) shifts into the present progressive (“ringing”). On the other side of the hyphen, after which “that Sunday morning in 1833” is invoked, the reader is now partly *there* in what is a divided or overtone and composite location. Narrative in Faulkner is a more sensitive device for perceiving reality, more sensitive than the sense perception of its characters that nonetheless reflexively constrains the possibility of world. Narrative perceives a sound that is not identical to narrative form.

The bells preserve their concentric power, while the echo of the shot that kills Bon, traveling across distance, serves to isolate the void at the center of life in Jefferson. It acts contrary to the patrimonial chain of listening that has defined the town. Rosa hears the shot at an uncanny distance of twelve miles from the threshold of Sutpen’s Hundred (Bon barred from entering). These distances mark, in acoustical space, the tension between the communal and what it will not (and cannot) sanction. The bells resound from the center of town, while the echo of the shot outlines its acoustical limits. The bells are purged of their religious function, the historical replacing the eternal time called forth in worship.

But in the echo of the shot, this long distance listening is stretched over retroactive and non-reiterative time. “*That was all*, Rosa, will say of Bon’s murder so many years later. “*Or rather, not all, since there is no all, no finish.... You see, I never saw him. I never even saw him dead. I heard an echo, but not the shot*” (Faulkner 1990b, 123). The sound is interpellating, but cannot be faced, calling into a space outside of the concentric. Rosa will never see Bon’s corpse: it is acousmatic, belonging to a scene that is heard but not seen. That separation is, however, primary: the sound was never “of” a body, but the obliteration of that body. The echo of the shot is not a symbol, having been drained of its meaning-making function. The echo of the shot destroys the very synecdochal logic that allows one to link body and sound, voice and identity.

The unconscious, Denise Riley suggests, is in the air between people (2000, 15). If it is not in the depths of the subject, then it is before but also through. The felt conditions of appearance in the present are complicated within Yoknapatawpha as an object of literary history in that Faulkner

returned time and again to a series of sounds that do not so much repeat across discrete works as resonate, future instances revising the first, traveling though a mediatized air.

Sounds in and across Faulkner's work remain resurrected, incomplete, and not fully treated or uncontained, not only for the characters who hear, but for the writer who continually returned, echoically, to a series of sounds that, while they repeat, bear out different lives, in different bodies, and in similar yet contradictory spaces and selves. In *Absalom*, Rosa rushes up the stairs after hearing the echo of the shot only to be blocked by Clytie, the daughter of Sutpen and a slave concubine. In "Evangeline," Faulkner's earliest and unpublished treatment of the scene at the stairs, it will not be Rosa (who had not yet been imagined), but rather Clytie (here named "Raby") who hears more than she ought to, more than she can bear. The unnamed narrator of "Evangeline" will recall, "And she [Raby] told me about the slow scuffling feet coming down the stairs (she was hidden then, in a closet beneath the staircase), hearing the slow feet move across overhead, and pass out the door and cease" (Faulkner 1995, 592). This phrase will not be revised in *Absalom*, but will *resound* to adhere to a changed body, a new circumstance. For Rosa will recall, as if in echo of Raby, "*we still lived in that time which that shot, those running mad feet, had put a period to and then obliterated, as though that afternoon had never been*" (Faulkner 1990b, 127)." If in "Evangeline" Clytie is a primary narrator, in *Absalom* she will be silenced. Clytie's memories are redacted from the revision, banished behind narrative appearance as its condition, the Real of narrative to which so many black bodies are relegated: it is along this resonant border of white Southern consciousness that the Faulknerian narrative ear is shaped. While this sequence of Clytie's storytelling and audition will not survive revision, it perhaps does, if we can understand the scene in which Clytie blocks Rosa from seeing Bon's body as its displacement, but also its *Fortsetzung* (continuation) as the historical determination of Quentin, who will later claim to hear these sets of sounds as if from memory. Faulkner's audition denatures memory as property. The shared acoustical experience—overhearing authority—moves between Rosa and Clytie's bodies at the level of composition to exceed the boundaries of the individual. The experience outweighs the body as form, outweighs the character's claim to constitution. Clytie, whose traumatic history will be all but erased in *Absalom*, resonates into the constitution of Rosa as the primary narrator of the novel whose acts of overhearing first call the novel into being.

There are consequences for form as Faulkner seeks it in the fact of resonance; we might say it lends the very novel its echoic effect. The echo of the shot that kills Bon will not end with her own body as Quentin goes on to re-experience and transpersonally resume what for Rosa was incomplete "because there was also something which he too could not pass—that door, the running feet on the stairs beyond it almost a continuation of the faint shot" (1990b, 129). This echo happens within Quentin as a "memory," though impossible in objective terms; it is a fact of resonance. The echo of

the shot is not disembodied, but transembodied, for there is something of the sound that was never for Rosa's ears either. Rosa heard it at an uncanny, broadcast distance of twelve miles, far from the home she will only almost join. Otherwise dispossessed of narrative and meaning, the echo of the shot is, however, assumed by her. As Rosa will say, "there is a might-have-been that is more than truth" (Faulkner 1990b, 115).

All in Yoknapatawpha are caught up in one long and encompassing suspiration—violence and forlorn possibility are in the air that circulates constitutively as form. Such form is, like Bon, a "passing shape" (1990b, 119), one that emerges in the air between people, fluctuating and moving across works, to soften the otherwise ossified boundaries between individuals and works themselves. Sounds outline the boundaries of objects, but also the subjects to which they ostensibly yet only impermanently belong.

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