

Anthropology Book Forum

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CLEMENT, TANYA ELIZABETH, 2024. *Dissonant Records: Close Listening to Literary Archives*, 1st ed., Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press., ISBN 0-262-37922-8

In *Dissonant Records: Close Listening to Literary Archives*, Tanya E. Clement argues that spoken word audio recordings are underrepresented in archival institutions and neglected in literary scholarship. It is evident that there is an overabundance of textual records in libraries and archives – a preference of archivists and scholars which trickles down into the discursive spaces of scholarship and the public imaginary (xi). In her book, Clement engages with ‘silence,’ both the literal pauses in sound recordings which constitute “active absences” that can be rich with meaning, and the ‘silencing’ power of the archive that denies alternative forms of knowledge production (xiii, 7).

Clement succinctly presents why there is a scarcity of sound recordings in literary archival institutions and a general apathy for audio archives amongst scholars (12-13). This disparity can be explained by economic and social realities (e.g., the fragility of media types, limited resources for digitization, the privacy concerns of their subjects, inconsistent metadata, the lack of playback machines in reading rooms, etc.). The lack of engagement with sound recordings in literary scholarship is not only a detriment to historical inquiry, but a hindrance to our critical engagement with the past through new paths of interpretation, including the ‘close listening’ methodology for which the book is advocating.

What sets this book apart from other work on audio-visual archives is Clement’s focus on the “hermeneutics of media,” particularly the use of *resonance* as an engine of meaning-making (3). Her hermeneutic approach requires a consideration of the dialogical nature of the recording, between the recorder and recorded and the compression of the past recording and the present

researcher, as well as the audio-materiality of sound media, such as grain, distortion, and amplification. (8). Clement also examines the entelechy of audio records that capture traces of multiple voices, silences, and liminal sounds, allowing for fluid and diverse interpretation and meaning making within the archival interaction (9-10).

The counter-term to resonance is ‘dissonance,’ the concept which provides the book’s title. Clement draws our attention to the unwieldy nature of audio recording as a medium with technical limitations in both recording and playback. The “messiness” of sound recordings, defined by various technical issues such as amplification, interference, distortion, and compression, are the ‘dissonant’ noises which grounds Clement’s analysis. Clement explores these concepts with five case studies, each comprising a chapter of the book.

In Chapter 1, the author ‘close listens’ to oral histories of survivors of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, recorded fifty years after the event by Ruth Sigler Avery, a White, Tulsan woman who herself was present at the event as a young child. In the oral history recordings, Clement pays attention to non-verbal paratextual moments (silence, laughter, and tone) which complicate and subvert Ruth’s conversations with her subjects. For example, laughter plays a significant role in the oral history testimony. In the testimony of a Black female participant, her laughter signals the warm and friendly relationship between interviewer and subject. With the white male participants, laughter signals moments of discomfort, including when one subject recalls overhearing a Black woman being asked for her husband’s name by an on-duty member of the American Legion and that her reply was that she did not know it. The subject takes the statement at face-value and laughs at the woman, taking her to be ignorant. Meanwhile, the modern reader interprets the comment as a purposeful evasion intended to secure her family’s safety. (32).

In Chapter 2, Clement compares recordings of Zora Neale Hurston’s ethnographic study of Black communities in the American South with similar recordings created by the Work Projects Administration in the 1930s. She focuses on distortions and inaudibility created by the technical limitations of the original recording and subsequent digitization. Chapter 3 focuses on recordings made of Ralph Ellison during the 1953 Harvard Summer School Conference on the Contemporary Novel. She listens for what Ellison *does not* say during his lecture to a mostly white audience,

particularly about race and the burgeoning tensions of the civil rights movement (73-75). These silences are “interferences” that make “resonant the unknown, the unseen, and the unheard” (70).

It is surprising that the psychoanalytic elements of ‘close listening’ are not made explicit in the book. Her concept of ‘resonance’ is defined as the researcher’s awareness of their own reactions and feelings within the interviewer-subject relationship. She traces the concept to Margaret Mead’s 1949 conference paper “Possible Mechanism of Recall and Recognition,” and not further back to Sigmund Freud’s theory of *countertransference*, of which Mead was assuredly aware (Howard, 360). It is possible that the ‘close listening’ methodology would benefit from a deeper engagement with psychoanalytic concepts, or at least the recognition that it already resembles aspects of Freudian theory. To draw a comparison to a concept articulated by Otto Kernberg, “psychoanalytic listening” includes listening for what is unwittingly communicated by the unconscious, listening to one’s own emotional response to what is being communicated, and allowing for a multiplicity of meaning within communication (Kernberg, 193). Had her study drawn upon these psychoanalytic concepts, it may have garnered a deeper understanding of the interiority of her subjects. For example, Ellison’s “resonant silences” during a speech to a primarily white audience may have also reflected what Frantz Fanon describes as “a collapse of the ego [wherein] the Black man stops behaving as an *actional* person” and acts only in “reaction” to white society, or ‘the Other’ (Fanon, 132). If the purpose of ‘close listening’ is to look past the surface-level content of communication and gain insight into the interiority of the historical subject, captured and preserved outside of time by the recording, it would achieve its goals better by using the tools of psychoanalytic inquiry.

The last two chapters focus on a more unusual set of recordings not typical in literary studies: personal therapy sessions recorded by the poet Anne Sexton; and recordings of Tarot-readings by the queer feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldúa. The recordings capture expressions of contested identity. In Sexton’s case, Clement describes how an exploration of one’s “true self” in the therapeutic context leads to a determination that the self is always mediated; and for Anzaldúa, listening to her own non-verbal reactions to the Tarot readings allows her to discover her spiritual identity (91, 111). Both Sexton and Anzaldúa interact with their recordings and subsequently record their reactions, creating a dialogical process between creator and creation, complicated by

the presence of the archival researcher in the present and future. Although these stories are very compelling and make the case for her overall argument, I wonder how relevant these case studies might be for future scholarship given the atypical circumstances of the recordings. Due to the privacy issues inherent in recordings such as therapy tapes, which are legally protected personal health information, it is unlikely that similar sets of audio records exist in public archives. Therefore, these case studies arguably lack demonstrative value for future research.

While the book's case studies are insightful and make an argument for the potential benefit of her methodology, it is limited by the selectiveness of its analysis spread across mostly unrelated literary and historical events. A book-length study of any one of these case studies would better showcase the benefits of 'close listening.' For example, what might a cross-sectional study of the oral history of the Tulsa Race Massacre reveal about that event's perpetrators, victims, and witnesses? Or how would a comparison of Ellison's 1956 speech and his later speeches given under different circumstances illuminate our understanding of his interior life across time? *Dissonant Records* is perhaps best appreciated as a form of advocacy for the epistemological potential of the hermeneutics of media. That full potential – and the potential of transformative and critical engagement with sound recordings in literary study and beyond – has yet to be realized.

Works cited

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