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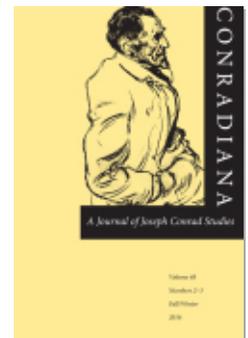
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Music's Unseen Body: Conrad, Cowell, Du Bois and the Beginnings of American Experimental Music¹

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THE NEW SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

It's a truism that Conrad wanted "to make you see," but his preface to *Heart of Darkness* describes the novel as a "sinister resonance" and "continued vibration." These sonic strategies place Conrad unexpectedly within the history of American experimental music, beginning with Henry Cowell's influential work for piano, "Sinister Resonance." Cowell's transgressive use of overtones amplifies the importance of race and sexuality in Conrad, which is complicated by another transatlantic resonance—that between Conrad and W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*. Both writers were influenced by Wagner's emphasis on hearing music without seeing the orchestra. Ultimately, the essay retrieves the sensuality of the piano as a transatlantic nexus of race, embodiment, and sound.

[T]he world . . . is not legible, but audible.
—Jacques Attali

I take the title of this essay from "Music's Body," the final section of Roland Barthes's monumental collection of essays, *The Responsibility of Forms*. The English title is not a translation of *Lobvie et lobtus*, but rather a transposition

in the musical sense, bringing Barthes's thought into another key, another register. Barthesian form incites, gives pleasure, but rarely does it take responsibility. What is the extent of form's responsibility, particularly when we recall Barthes's most famous claim regarding the death of the author, the ethical locus that would seem to respond? "Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away," he writes, "the negative [*le noir-et-blanc*] where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing" (*Image* 142).

I wish to respond by returning to Conrad's opening remarks in the 1917 "Author's Note" to *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Conrad tells us that if *Youth* had been a matter of "sincere colouring," *Heart of Darkness* demanded "another art altogether": "It had to be given a sinister resonance, a tonality of its own, a continued vibration that, I hoped, would hang in the air and dwell on the ear long after the last note had been struck" (*Youth* xi). Something is unseen or cannot be rendered by an optical metaphor. There is an oblique, written space, but it is fundamentally vibrant. Some residue of a body persists, but no longer as a locus of identity and its unity. This residue is not to be localized in the "ear" but across a more generalized corporeality, one that "listens" through vibrations and the subaural.²

In an earlier essay, I remarked upon Conrad's phrase at length, lingering on the sense of a "continued vibration," as it represents one of the most provocative, yet ignored theories of modernist narrativity.³ There is a vibrancy within the realm of the audible and visible, a force that cuts through dualism. We no longer confront the novel as "watching" or "speaking," but rather as a subaural activity that permeates the apparent stability of entities: it is "another art altogether."

The physical reality of vibration found Conrad on September 29, 1898, just before beginning *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad wrote to Edward Garnett to describe his astonishment after meeting with a radiologist who had showed Conrad an x-ray of his own hand and played for him a recording of a Polish pianist:

The secret of the universe is in the existence of horizontal waves whose varied vibrations are at the bottom of all states of consciousness [. . .]. And, note, *all* matter (the universe) composed of the same matter, matter, *all matter* being only that thing of inconceivable tenuity through which the various vibrations of waves (electricity, heat, sound, light, etc.) are propagated, thus giving birth to our sensations—then emotions—then thought. Is this so? (*CL* 2:94–95).

Conrad begins to theorize the essential premise of *Heart of Darkness*: sounds and voices carry across space and transpire in time. He speculates a most invisible level of embodiment, the tie that binds a body to the world of “vibrant matter.”⁴

His emphatic claim was also political. In vibrations, Conrad found the materiality of solidarity he had been seeking in the famous Preface to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus.”* He had been seeking this tie within the English language itself. This search for a place in world literature is memorably described by Christopher GoGwilt in *The Passage of Literature* when he writes of English being for Conrad what James Russell Lowell calls “a spiritual lingua franca that abolishes all alienage of race” (9). Vibration was for Conrad the material embodiment of this spirit, its extralinguistic and sonorous medium, linking body to body, place to place, time to time in ways that assuaged his own apprehensiveness over national belonging, or what I have called a “vibrational monad.” In this monad, matter and language share an origin in vibration. The novel itself vibrates; it continues long after the last note has been struck.⁵

When Conrad meditates on the effects of *Heart of Darkness*, the novel as a form is no longer contained within itself, but in a hypothetical body of an idealized English reader (anonymous and implicitly universal) who in reading also “hears,” and in hearing hears later in haunting and not yet determined ways. It is a sound of the future, a form enacted. Conrad relinquishes the body writing for an oblique space of vibration. The book is complete; one is finished reading, and yet a “note”—a single unit of music (what kind of music is unclear)—is said to “hang.” Something of *Heart of Darkness* demands that one read again and listen again, thought and perception confronted with the sense of their incompleteness. Neither inward nor outward, embodied nor disembodied, form becomes a residual phenomenon for some other moment that is quite literally without premonition, without monitor.

Something of this residue forces me to return again. In my earlier remarks, I did not ask what in Conrad's resonance is “sinister,” particularly for a novel whose most concentrated object of auditory memory is the percussion music of the Congo. This nearly constant vibration of the sound space of *Heart of Darkness* moves through the night air from the Congo to Marlow's space of memory at the threshold of London. I have described how all voices in *Heart of Darkness* are reduced, in a manner of speaking, to their material condition in sound and vibration, but the phrase “sinister resonance” is ethnocentric in its charge: some vibrant, sonorous matter fails to attain to the spiritual *lingua franca*, as if a leftover or remainder of its movement. The unity, tenuity, and universality of vibration are belied by the racial slur that gives Conrad's earlier

novel its title, a title recast in “darkness.” This word cannot shed its associations with the visibility of skin.

The sinister resonance demands a politics of listening. It concerns not only the boundaries of inside and outside, but also duration—a responsibility of form. In “Listening,” Barthes remarks upon the “shimmering” dimension of signifiers (*le miroitement des signifiants*), which is vibrant in its charge (*Responsibility* 259–29). Conrad once spoke in an author’s note of events that sound a “note of warning,” words themselves changing in their affective register the moment they confront a new political reality (*Victory* xi). For a writer who never collected his aesthetic remarks in a complete way, Conrad’s enigmatic “Author’s Notes” take on a double existence, as so many dispersed notes, singular and temporalized soundings. *Heart of Darkness* is one such note of warning in an as-yet incomplete, resonant movement.

This movement recalls, for example, the place of polyrhythm in jazz, and with it, the forms of metric dissonance produced by phantom rhythms. These are past moments of a composition that still resound in memory during a present section at odds with what came before it. This formal effect is produced chiefly at the psychological level of hearing. The sinister resonance connotes a still more intransigent dissonance of psychological harm, one with potential and yet refusal to resolve. Sinister resonance elapses and yet elapses in post-colonial time. This temporality of *Heart of Darkness* begins in a formal consideration: Conrad writes into his novel two auditors. They do not always take up what they hear in tandem, at times coinciding, at times splitting apart. Marlow and our unnamed narrator do not know, but rather come to sense that their shared mode of hearing, premised upon European protocols, is a false consciousness in the midst of transformation by sounds that demand their recognition.

The physical “site” of the sinister resonance is multiple and diachronic, and cannot be exclusively located within *Heart of Darkness*, only resonantly. In what follows, I take up two moments on the other side of the Atlantic, which are not meant to be exhaustive, but rather suggestive of the geopolitical coordinates opened up by the temporality of the sinister resonance: Henry Cowell’s 1930 composition for piano, “Sinister Resonance,” and W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). These are two radical experiments in form, but also in the praxis of listening and what it might afford an anachronic literary history.

COWELL: OVERTONES AND THE PIANO STRETCHED

That a sinister resonance suggests a modality of form would not have been lost on Cowell, teacher of John Cage. Cage famously went on to argue that there is

no such thing as absolute silence. In a piece inspired by Robert Rauschenberg's white paintings, titled "4'33" (invoking the duration of single side of a 45-rpm record), Cage directs the performer simply to sit at the piano while the audience hears the room itself, its minor sounds and movements, breathing and stirring. This moment is widely accepted as the origin of classic minimalism, as it extends to American composers Phillip Glass, La Monte Young, and Terry Riley. It is music of so-called "monotonous" duration drained of the dramatic action that defines several Western forms.⁷ Cage asks his audience to listen to the spatial condition of the possibility of listening; we will find that this spatial condition in Conrad is never "neutral," in Barthes's phrase, but rather marked by the ideological, racialized, and social categories through which sound moves.

Cage would later speak, in his lecture "The Future of Music: Credo," of "Percussion music [that] is a contemporary transition from keyboard-influenced music to the all-sound music of the future" (3). It is easy to forget that the piano is a percussion instrument, hammers hitting strings in the part of the instrument frequently concealed from view. His works for prepared piano further convert the piano into a percussive instrument through attached objects. The keyboard becomes not a note-maker *per se*, but a sound-maker, stretched away from the constraints of equal temperament.⁸ The piano is already "sinister" to the extent that it requires both hands in a redistribution of the sensible. The left hand (Latin: *sinister*), otherwise suppressed in cultural life, is positioned at the bass, the lowest and most vibrating register, while also crossing over into other tonal registers. The extended and prepared piano is something akin to a prosthetic body with transgressive appendages that allow the instrument to vibrate in alternative ways.

Cowell's famous composition for extended piano elapses in just a few minutes yet changed Western classical music in its primary mediums of execution and dissemination in the piano and score. The title, "Sinister Resonance"—attributed to Cowell—still floats in the contemporary discourse of experimental music, but none address what I take to be the source of Cowell's title, the 1917 "Author's Note" to *Youth and Two Other Stories*, and with it, the percussive sounds of the Congo as heard by Marlow at a spatial and visual distance.⁹

What is at stake in "hearing" Conrad in this composition? The conversations between Cowell and Cage in 1933 to 1940 are at the center of an aesthetic history that solidifies Cage in American modernism and its critical inheritors. It is a history in which the "experimental" becomes, as George Lewis has shown, one locus of the still-entrenched binary between composition and (jazz) improvisation that excludes and primitivizes black source material. The unspoken and implicit fallacy of black life for Cage's theory of

all-sound lies in its being bound to the determinacy and historicity that is racialized embodiment.

The story and valences of classic minimalism are altered the moment we consider the displaced place of Conrad in American experimental music discourse. If the phrase “sinister resonance” is also a fragment of transatlantic and colonial discourse, then these distant signals from Conrad take on newly audible and politicized form, haunting the American modernist tradition and its modes of hearing. While the (white) American tradition listens to and takes up African and African diasporic voices and sounds—often used as disembodied source material by minimalist tape composers descended from Cage¹⁰—it excludes from its intellectual domain the temporally and spatially dispersed diaspora, and with it, the “indigenous American musical forms based in black culture” (Lewis 380).

“Hearing” the relation between Conrad and Cowell is two-fold in its implications. As a conjuncture, “Sinister Resonance” places a work of literature—Conradian modes of listening—within the history and theory of American experimental music and sound. As a conjecture, it encounters the literary work of art within an already resonant field of relation and correspondence. “Sinister Resonance” is an anachronic event of reception, what happens later redefining what happened before. Cowell allows us to *rehear* Conrad. Conrad’s “Africa” is charged with the spatiotemporality of the diaspora, including the proleptic movement of those sounds into white and black American cultural imaginaries in the 1920s and 30s.¹¹ The boundaries of an author or his work shimmer across rehearsals and rewritings. I don’t intend to locate Conrad’s Congo as an origin or land mass—or even in a projected “image,” in Chinua Achebe’s influential phrase¹²—but rather in a resonance.

If Cowell read *Heart of Darkness*, then perhaps the novel prepared his receptiveness to a music that, primitivized by his lexicon, was nonetheless at the center of his thinking about rhythm and percussion. There is between Conrad and Cowell a black sonic trace within the history of classic (white) modernism. Perhaps—again, I am writing not with certainty, but in a subjunctive mood of resonant conjecture—Cowell recognized *Heart of Darkness* as a proto-ethnographic recording of Congolese music. It is among the first British literary works to provide more than merely a passing description of African sound, a work that achieved wide readership in 1920s and 30s America. Conrad’s descriptions, Nidesh Lawtoo argues, lend a nearly anthropological framework to Marlow’s observations of Fang musical rituals of possession trance (130). I would go further to suggest that *Heart of Darkness* is a technology of listening and memory in the moment that field recording is becoming itself (Cowell himself later worked on ethnographic recordings).¹³ Conrad’s proto-

field recording is without the orchestral being Theodor Reik and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe attribute to the “haunting melody.”¹⁴ It is not a melody in memory, but a field recording, a *sound*.

Searching for *Heart of Darkness* as both impetus and template for Cowell's extended piano, we can begin by returning to rehear Cowell's materialist, vibrational premise. It is one from which considerations of racialized embodiment are thought to be absent and in ways that continue to orient discussions of all-sound. Cowell's player strikes the keys with his left hand, and with the vitals of the piano exposed, partially dampens the string to produce a multitude of overtones and harmonics. The overtones act as the “body” of music to some extent, the dimension of a note that vibrates and resonates. In the extended piano, the body of the performer no longer stands on the outside, but within the piano, as if within an “immense body.”¹⁵ As a concept, “dissonance” originates in Western tonal music, implicated in its necessity to resolve. Yet, Cowell works against this tradition of tonality (despite his piece being notated on a staff) as if to call out for an unresolved identity.¹⁶

Cowell demands that one understand, that one hear (*entend*) that every fundamental tone is composed of partials and overtones. These are the smaller tones that resonate after an attack in a continued vibration. They are the tones that give any instrument its timbre, which allows one to recognize a familiar instrument without seeing it. Even in the piano, which equalizes differences in pitch, every “fundamental” tone is immanently and constitutively multiple. In its overtone materiality, “Sinister Resonance” demands rehearing. It is a music no longer premised upon the West, the piano rescued for some other excluded tonal domain. At the same time, Cowell opened up the vitals of the piano, showing something of its heart. For, in placing his hand on the string, the pianist now sympathetically vibrates with the piano in a whole-body music. Cowell basks in the surplus that is *overtone*ality. It is, quite simply, a music that hears itself, where the pianist finds himself physically within its vibratory field.

In the vibratory field, one senses that some distance constituting nearness structures the relationship between Marlow and his silent listener. Their two bodies are held together in sounds and in a racially composite space of sound. Sexuality becomes an equally central determinant of all-sound. For is it not possible that, with his whole-body, all-sound music, Cowell, a queer composer, responded to the erotic dimension of voices and sounds in Conrad? Perhaps some dissonance lies within his identity that refuses to resolve. We can recall, for example, the recurring place of the figure of the erogenous zone of the “mouth of the river” in Conrad as a place where, Geoffrey Harpham describes, desire is both textually registered and stimulated (*Youth* 123).¹⁷ If the event of listening makes a space for an erotic reception of male voices, Marlow's desire

to possess the voice of Kurtz is articulated in highly motile ways: sounds from the Congolese outside vibrate into the cloisters of Marlow's steamer and into the *Nellie* in his acts of sonic memory.

These sounds were likely paired in Conrad's remembrance with a single memory of having heard Wagner. Perhaps it was through the memory of melody that he struggled to organize what he was hearing into something familiar. Conrad claimed that he knew "absolutely nothing" about Wagner's legends *mise en musique*. "I don't even know them by way of opera-books, as the only Wagnerian production I've ever seen is his Tristan—24 years ago in Brussels" (the city that gives to Marlow his site of departure) (*CL* 2:208).¹⁸ Conrad carried the Wagnerian memory with him to the Congo. In Marlow's descriptions of visual occlusion ("a curtain of trees" through which sounds pass), we can recognize something of what Brian Kane describes as Wagner's acousmatic aesthetic of the "invisible orchestra," the audience being protected from the orchestra's visual source by elaborate screens and veils.¹⁹ Marlow continually hears drumming and crying without seeing its source, as if through a screen or veil.

The sense of vision *dampens* sound's erotic charge, not unlike the part of the piano that forecloses continued vibration of a string. Darkness shields Tristan and Isolde as lovers in the *Liebesnacht* when the sun threatens to destroy them (DiGaetani 29). The night in *Heart of Darkness* becomes transracial in its erotic charge. These sounds—above all, a droning and repetitive memory of drums—bleed into the space of discourse as would a vibration. Cowell, already drawn to the polyrhythmic percussion music of Africa, perhaps heard this erotic and transracial *dimension* of sound in Conrad to "queer" the piano, eliciting the array of overtones—an unseen, stretched space of the note—that the rise of equal temperament had for centuries dissolved. The rise of the keyboard and equal temperament in the fourteenth century narrowed the space for overtone effluence.

It is here, I would suggest, that one becomes politically attuned to the diaspora, but also to a postcolonial portent. Modernism itself becomes dispersed as a category, for Marlow's mode of telling in *Heart of Darkness* carries a sonic trace of the temporality of Congolese drumming. It is a trace that Lawtoo might describe as a mimetic sharing in the rhythms of sub-Saharan practices of possession trance (from Latin *transire*, to pass, Lawtoo notes) (143). Such a notion pushes against the thought, articulated by Michael Taussig, that Marlow is merely hallucinatory in his narrative effects.²⁰ The drone, overtone in its vertical or spatial dimension, elicits an effect upon the horizontal dimension of time. It is not that Marlow's listener is lulled, the drone at odds with the intellect: "I was awake," he says. "I listened on the watch" (*Youth* 83). In the drone,

neither he nor we can be sure of this voice's duration, of how much time has passed, of a "point" of beginning and ending.²¹ Conrad's use of the "frame" narrator is among his chief innovations as a modernist. But there is neither a "frame" nor even the *énoncé* traditionally conceived. There is a sinister resonance.

Suspended in the drone, central to the formal characteristics of American minimalism, the *Nellie* becomes a close companion to the Congolese sound space that can no longer be said to function at an extreme distance, the two spaces touching. The music of possession trance is the center or beating "heart" of memory in *Heart of Darkness*, its sound punctuating and surrounding Marlow's every recitation of experience: "The monotonous beating of a big drum filled the air with muffled shocks and a lingering vibration. A steady droning sound of many men chanting each to himself some weird incantation" (140). The steady drone is ritualistic and incantatory, but the drum's signals are also obfuscating. As "a technique of long-distance communication," the tom-tom is faintly recalled by revolutionary radio in its confidential and secret broadcasts (Fanon 78).²² When Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe describes in passing the "true form" of Conrad's novel as an *oratorio*, he invokes its reduction to voices and with it, the formal characteristic of Kurtz's speech, an aria, opposing "the indistinct 'clamour' of the savages (the chorus)" (114). But this so-called "clamour" belongs not only to voices in their enunciation and semantic register (unheard by Marlow, who never documents African languages), but also to their movement across space in close collaboration with the drums. Their signals are unintelligible to Marlow. We can replace Lacoue-Labarthe's ascriptions of "primitive" and "savage" to hear instead a radical portent. The enunciative level of narrative discourse elides the political portent of drumming, but it is well heard by narrative acoustics: an unseen people who resist colonization and make music in the jungle are a revolutionary people.

The sounds politicize Marlow's senses themselves. Vibration becomes in this way a matter of practice oriented towards the dissolution of borders and frames. Where there is dissolution there is also dispersion, the space-time of the diaspora. It redefines the significance of Conrad's narrative technique, particularly as it might become a template for sonic expression. In this space-time, what is otherwise held cognitively at bay is made sensible and near. Just before announcing the presence of Marlow, the unnamed narrator recalls a Company man playing dominoes aboard ship. He toys "architecturally with the bones," ivory reshaped into this other form without having lost completely its sense of being a residue of colonial extraction (*Youth* 46). These silent shards of ivory litter the ship where an event of oral storytelling takes place. A dialectical image of extraction begins the novel in the dominoes, as they are, at the same

time, a deconstituted image of the piano, its ivory keys. In the “bones,” a *memento mori*, there is a simultaneity, but also a muted sound. There are cognitive overtones to this image whose frame now weakens. In a partial opening of his senses, the unnamed narrator—who is about to become a *listener*—registers without fully cognizing that a shard of the Congo is within European aesthetic production, as its silent material condition.

To emphasize *touch* in contrast to the logic of Western counterpoint, which still organizes Edward Said’s notion of “contrapuntal analysis,” is to privilege this opening as a non-Western ontology. Such an opening is shared by classic minimalism where, in repetition and drone, the immanent and overtone being of sounds unfold in their otherwise unheard multiplicity; the longer one hears, the “more” one hears. In the novel’s penultimate scene, when the voices and sounds of the Congo acoustically surround Marlow in memory, as if still resonating from there, he stands in the drawing room of the Intended, the drawing room being a locus of European sonic-aesthetic reception, from oral storytelling to the piano and, later in the twentieth century, the phonograph and radio.²³ Marlow remembers: “A grand piano stood massively in a corner, with dark gleams on the flat surfaces like a somber and polished sarcophagus. A high door opened—closed. I rose” (156). The piano is a mute thing, a coffin. While it sits in the attitude of a corpse, it is no dead object. The piano is crying out; it vibrates. Kurtz, we are told, is a gifted speaker. “Incidentally,” his cousin remarks to Marlow, “he gave me to understand that Kurtz had been essentially a great musician” (153). He was an organist, but this music is a possibility lost to the novel, one that Marlow never hears. What kind of music would Kurtz make? When he enters the drawing room, Marlow cannot sit down and reproduce musically the sound he has heard in the Congo; it is not written or meant for the piano.

Is Cowell’s “Sinister Resonance” that anachronic, missing sound? It is the sound of a piano stretched beyond itself. It is an amalgamated sound of the future. When sitting on the *Nellie*, Marlow describes a music that his silent listeners have never heard and speaks within a series of conjectural and conjunctural transformations: Conrad was writing before such music would be disseminated across the globe, but also in the moment that African American music was in the midst of becoming the primary accumulation of a nascent white-owned recording industry. Ragtime was in the process becoming itself in the United States and Europe.²⁴ Conrad would have been familiar, too, with the offensive imitations of black song on the minstrel stages of Victorian England. It is not that Marlow hears in the Congo a pure “origin” of this African American classical music. Rather, he hears what is coeval to the Victorian culture of the piano. In this way, the sound he hears “in” or “from” the Congo

(resonance destabilizes all such genitive coordinates) is split or divided. *Heart of Darkness*—as resonance—is a spatializing memory-system and sound-system caught up in the movements (*choreo*) of sounds.

In conclusion, I would now like to turn to Du Bois who, listening to the diaspora on the other side of the Atlantic, provides the language for such an event. He notates melodies in text and describes the “Veil,” a transatlantic nexus of race and listening that transmits the sound of the “cry,” part call and part response.

SORROW SONGS AND THE CRY

In the years that Conrad was writing *Heart of Darkness*, Du Bois began to collect the essays of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and composed a final essay for the collection, titling it after a Middle Passage music, “The Sorrow Songs.” The sorrow song is a hybrid musical practice. It is a music of contact whose condition of possibility is extreme violence in the transatlantic slave trade. Du Bois’s book itself is a hybrid genre work that crosses sociology, fiction, prose, and each in a language that speaks elliptically and pluralistically to the senses, Mary Zamberlin suggests, after the manner of Du Bois’s teacher William James. The text works by way of a “micro-politics” whose many registers cannot be easily interpreted or exhausted (Zamberlin 85).

Conrad had spent his early years in exile, struggling to speak clearly in a foreign tongue; Du Bois wrote from the position of the excluded class, the being to whom you are not listening. His life ended in exile, with revoked citizenship (though Du Bois chose to go to Ghana, we cannot forget that he was deemed an enemy of the state). Like Conrad, Du Bois refused to speak univocally in text. “And, finally,” he concludes the “Forethought,” “need I add that I who speak here am bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh of them that live within the Veil?” (6). The Veil, as Du Bois defines it in “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” is the psychological, physical, and social barrier traumatically instantiated by racialization. It is the condition of “double consciousness” by which one experiences oneself through a repudiating revelation of the other. While also transfiguring the Hegelian notion of self-consciousness, Du Bois makes his most famous claim on behalf of belonging to a world-historical people: he gestures to Hegel’s World History that posited six peoples and omitted Africa. Du Bois writes towards inclusion that also transfigures through racializing the notion of consciousness, writing “the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (10–11). In double consciousness, one sees

oneself, but one also hears oneself and the other world.²⁵ “In those somber forests of his striving his own soul rose before him, and he saw himself,—darkly as through a veil” (14). Through this visual barrier resonate the song and “message of another people” (12).

The traumatic figure of the Veil can be routed through Du Bois’s reception of the Wagnerian invisible orchestra. Du Bois refigures its sensory and spiritual dimension for newly political purposes.²⁶ He invokes the Veil in his first direct address to the reader, figuring rather than announcing his racial identity, preferring to speak unseen, as it were, and in ways that heighten readerly receptivity. The suggestive possibility of hearing without seeing, Jennifer Lynn Stoeber describes, later drove Du Bois to the radio in its early days as an acoustic technology that, he hoped, might suspend or adjust a racializing gaze.²⁷

Du Bois writes of the sorrow songs as the slave’s “naturally veiled and half articulate” message to the world (159). The faculty of hearing itself struggles in confronting the songs: “Once in a while we catch a strange word in an unknown tongue.” The semantic dimension dampened and sonorousness heightened, the singers “grope towards some unseen power.” Du Bois had concluded the opening chapter by portending “that men *may* listen to the striving in the souls of black folk [emphasis mine]” (16). The addressee’s faculty of hearing is not yet attuned, or limited and partial. At the center of this portentous hearing—for which a reader is not yet prepared—is the textual existence across *The Souls of Black Folk* of the “cry,” which is not linguistic, but sonorous. If adequately heard, he suggests, this cry might set a reader free; it resonates beyond the Veil to become the text’s most unifying figure (Zamberlin 85).

The percussion music that Marlow hears, as though on the other side of a veil, is accompanied by cries, shouts, and moans; in other moments, he overhears it, knowing nothing of what it means, except that it is “mournful” (*Youth* 102). “Before it stopped running with a muffled rattle, a cry, a very loud cry, as of infinite desolation, soared slowly in the opaque air” (101). Marlow hears an aria, and yet the moan, the cry, the wail—these are central motifs of African-American sound. What would it mean to suggest that Marlow hears sorrow song? The sinister resonance immediately becomes a transatlantic and diasporic formation.

We can take Marlow to be among Du Bois’s addressees for listening’s portent. He is someone who hears, but does not yet understand.²⁸ Marlow overhears a music that he feels to be addressing him. Yet, he is never fully able to go beyond himself in a way that would involve attributing language to the African being, as Achebe famously condemns. Is it possible that, working at some minimal material level, Conrad narrates the interruption of a consciousness that only begins to feel within him the other he both rebukes and desires? His

listening is not a fully present experience; he listens back in memory, but he is, from the beginning, convinced that what he hears is music. *The Souls of Black Folk* addresses itself to such conversion of the senses. When Du Bois and Conrad write the cry into text—never as onomatopoeia, but as a word and invocation—they mark a place in text for a muted sound, for the “confrontation between the powers of the written word and the impulses of orality” (Glissant 5, n. 2). Each incites a hypothetical hearing that stretches the senses of an imputed European reader towards the horizon of the other.²⁹

If the thought of the other remains in Conrad ethnocentric, denigrated, and held at bay, then Du Bois demands, through the inclusion of notated melody in text, a sonorous mode of futural knowing. Each chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk* begins with a bar of music from slave hymns, as if an invitation to sit down at the piano and play. In Du Bois's moment, the phonograph not yet perfected, to have music in the home was to play music. In including the fragments of melody without attribution or title, Du Bois implicitly invites the reader to sound out the melody on the piano keys, to play or otherwise sound out (such as with mass-produced piano rolls, the mechanical means of production that existed before phonograph recordings). Alexander Weheliye has likened these fragments to a cut and mix, a futuristic series of soundings that bode a not-yet invented turntable music of the diaspora in hip hop and reggae.³⁰ Du Bois cuts, mixes, and replays songs in an alternative matrix of American experimental music. This matrix is neither adjacent nor exterior, but simultaneous and interior to Cage and his inheritors, from minimalism to *musique concrète*. We have already “heard” Conrad's displaced sound vibrating in the composition of Cowell, which places Fang musical production at the beginning of an American experimental music trajectory. Du Bois demands that one hear American musical forms as being fundamentally based in black culture, in a Black Atlantic.³¹

When Du Bois included the bars of melodies as what he calls “some echo of haunting melody from the only American music which welled up from black souls in the dark past,” he does not presume some song that is immediately recalled, nor does he presume an absolute origin (6). It is an echo of a haunting, a doubly distant and yet portentous sound. In this moment, the Fisk Jubilee Singers were in the midst of a world tour, returning to, arranging, and performing old songs that already were, in Du Bois's phrase, “half forgotten” (155). Yet he could presume in his readers of a certain class a musical facility, an act of reading that might incite playing. To name the song in a scholarly annotation, as the original printed version does not, is to eliminate the sonorous mode of knowing that Du Bois calls upon. In inviting you to play and hear the melody (if you can), there is in the space of reading a moment of

musica practica (to recall the title of an essay by Barthes). He invites you to listen to a sound that is not yet known, open in the spatial relay between reading and playing. To “read” the melodies is to open an extradiegetic possibility of a sound. It is an act of sounding and self-listening, but acoustical and in physical space, which I have been privileging in this essay as vibrational.³²

The affective crux of “The Sorrow Songs” chapter is an African song inherited from the maternal line. He recalls a haunting melody, “Do ba-na co-ba,” sung by his grandfather’s grandmother, kidnapped by Dutch traders. He names it “the voice of exile” (157). Du Bois does not know what the words mean but deems the music “well understood.” When he writes of a transgenerational memory of the Bantu woman and her crooning, he transliterates the phonemes held by childhood memory into adulthood. These phonemes are heard not as words, but as sounds. The song has long been understood as traditional, but Du Bois’s approach to transmitting it is fundamentally experimental. There is contact between orality and writing through sinister resonance. Hearing again later politicizes childhood listening through a return. Though the words of “Do ba-na co-ba” have yet to be translated, they spread overtoneally. Du Bois’s sonic memory of these Bantu beginnings touches *Heart of Darkness* via the Niger-Congo family of languages, including Fang. These languages are missing and occluded from the semantic body of *Heart of Darkness*. In some precise sense, then, in locating a relation—a resonance—between Du Bois and Conrad, one cannot follow the traditional route afforded by either philology or polysemy. “The call of Relation is heard, but it is not yet a fully present experience” (Glissant 15). Such an experience defines the overtone’s composite reality.

Achebe is no doubt right to critique Conrad’s omissions of African languages. He takes particular aim at the moment when a man reports, “Mistah Kurtz, he dead.” For Achebe, Conrad’s African subaltern cannot speak. But indigenous languages inhabit the novel overtoneally, a muted because kidnapped possibility. The unnamed man speaking in broken English has been forcibly brought to English; colonial authority has consumed and forbidden his tongue. Du Bois politically recognizes the sense of a broken resonance when imagining listening to an unnamed Bantu woman’s crooning. This partial hearing touches another partial hearing: this man who announces Kurtz’s death speaks as an uncanny echo of Conrad, the speaker of broken English and the bearer of lost language possibilities in exile.

Du Bois says the sorrow songs are the only American music, a spiritual heritage and gift to the world. Conrad places his English avatar as a listener in a field of unseen sound he cannot fully understand; he gives him the gift of a listener, what Adriana Cavarero might call a “necessary other.”³³ This silent listener is the *Geist* of *Heart of Darkness*. He changes in relation to what he

hears as the story comes to its circular conclusion. He hears doubly; he hears as two, split in the moment he arrives in the European drawing room to hear two spaces at once: the memory of the Congo and the space that demands its silence. Du Bois hears Wagner and sorrow song through each other, Conrad also remembering Tristan's solo while hearing a cry. Du Bois writes, "*Hear my cry, O God the Reader; vouchsafe that this my book fall not still-born into the world-wilderness*" (164). "I hear; I admit, but I have a voice, too, and . . . mine is the speech that cannot be silenced," Marlow responds. Du Bois continues, "America shall rend the Veil."

In this future, there is listening, a mode of attention, recognition, and consciousness. It is hearing that is now, but only partial and limited. What in such partial hearing is, itself, "sinister?" The effect of an "afterthought," we might respond in Du Bois's lexicon. It is the longing after what in Du Bois's thought directs one towards futurity, the *à venir* where conditions for freedom have not yet been realized.

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Modernist Studies Association conference on November 21, 2015, at the "Vibration, Frequency, Revolution" panel, organized by Fred Solinger. Thank you to those auditors, as well as to those at "Conradian Cross-currents" for their feedback.

2. See Trower, and Eidsheim.

3. See Napolin, "A Sinister Resonance."

4. See Jane Bennett who encourages us to think of actants, rather than subjects.

5. Conrad's thought resonates, for example, with contemporary Sufi master Inayat Khan who writes, "No word spoken is ever lost; it remains, and it vibrates" (70). Khan delivered his lecture, "The Mystery of Sound," in England between 1914–19, and in Paris in 1922. He argues that hearing is enacted by the body, not the ears.

6. I draw this description of time from William Faulkner's account of the shared temporality of music and reading in *Absalom, Absalom!*

7. See Mertens.

8. In *Listening*, Jean-Luc Nancy describes resonance as "stretching," which recalls Heidegger's sense of *Dasein's* movement, stretching itself along (*Bewegtheit*). Nancy insists upon a *pure* possibility of listening in resonance, however, which at times disavows the problems Conrad confronts. For a related discussion of the politics of equal temperament and vibration, see Boon, *The Eternal Drone*.

9. This note was included in the American editions. Examining the score and Cowell's papers at the New York Public Library, I found no evidence that he read *Heart of Darkness*. However, Peter Mallios's *Our Conrad* describes the ways that Conrad was at the center of the American cultural and political imaginary in this moment, Conrad being featured on the cover of *Time* in 1924. Cowell wrote several essays on percussion, "noise," and the Western denigration of so-called "primitive" and "oriental" percussion. Though such ascriptions are

themselves backward, Cowell had high regard for non-Western music, writing against the idealized search for “pure” tone without “irregular vibrations.” There is a “noise element in the very tone itself of all our musical instruments,” Cowell wrote in 1929, “sound comprising all that can be heard, and rhythm [being] the formulated impulse behind the sound” (23). Cowell’s piece also gives the title to David Toop’s book, *Sinister Resonance*. Toop (a composer himself) doesn’t note the possible relationship between Conrad and Cowell, but he provides an elegant and attuned reading of sounds across Conrad’s corpus (196–203). In an email, Toop suggested to me that the echo of Conrad was very likely in his mind when titling his book.

10. Toop notes, for example, that the source material of one of Steve Reich’s most famous tape compositions, “It’s Gonna Rain” (1965), was the voice of black Pentecostal preacher. Such sounds were “so to speak, raw materials” (“Forever” 33). More importantly, Toop positions the story of classic minimalism as a subcategory of African diasporic sound, ranging from West African drumming to James Brown. These musics are often denigrated as “monotonous,” Toop notes, without intellectual valences, a reception he names “unhearing.” Reich’s experiments share a technical and philosophical ground with *musique concrète*, the acousmatic tape music of Pierre Schaeffer that gives us the notion of a “sound object” thought to be separable from its social, ecological, and ideological source.

11. For a brilliant discussion of the place of Conrad’s Congo in the literature of the Harlem Renaissance, for example, see Mallios, 186–217.

12. See Achebe.

13. For an influential discussion of the novel’s “phonographic logic,” see Krielkamp. While Krielkamp doesn’t consider ethnographic recording, it’s an important contemporary invention. Sir Harry Johnstone in Uganda made the earliest known wax cylinder recordings of West African music in 1901. Ethnographic field recording begins in the spring/summer of 1890, with the fieldwork of Jesse Walter Fewkes. Cowell’s music was known for so-called “wild” sonorities, and he later was a consultant for, helped edit, and wrote the liner notes for a number of Folkway recordings, such as “Primitive Musics of the World” (1962), which included field recordings of Congolese music. Cowell, Cage, and their cohort were searching for an *American* experimental music, but they turned to non-Western music for idioms.

14. See Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography*.

15. I draw this phrase from Henri Bergson’s comments on vibration in *Matter and Memory*, but the phrase also resonates with Conrad’s lexicon in *Heart of Darkness*. Marlow continually remarks upon the “immensity” of the river and jungle. Immensity in Conrad is racially corporeal.

16. Thank you to Andrew Niess who suggested this point in a discussion of my work at the University of Pennsylvania where I was a visitor in Naomi Waltham-Smith’s spring 2018 course, “Writing Sound-Sounding Literature.”

17. In my book-in-progress, I describe the feminine charge of this resonant space in Conrad that carries an otherwise unspoken memory of sexual transgression, rape, and miscegenation.

18. Thank you to Laurence Davies for recommending this letter to me. Conrad also carried the draft of the first seven chapters of *Almayer’s Folly* with him to the Congo and likened portions of the text to Tristan’s solo.

19. I cannot engage in this essay the Nietzschean resonances in Conrad, except to point

out that in his book dedicated to Wagner, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche describes a dyad in which the Apolline images of costume, dance, and setting also protect the listener from the Dionysian suffering carried by sound. Wagner felt, Brian Kane writes, that “the fully absorptive experience of music’s spiritual content” could be consummated only when the orchestra was unseen, protected from view by architecture, a veil, or screen (105). Conrad never made a pilgrimage to Bayreuth, but his memory of opera in Brussels would have been nurtured by long discussions with his writing partner and close friend, Ford Madox Ford. For a discussion of this relationship and Wagner’s influence, see DiGaetani (23–57). Kane also describes how many concert halls were retrofitted in the nineteenth century to match the Wagnerian-style building, including elaborate screens on which were often painted foliage. A 1910 photograph of the La Monnaie De Munt, the federal opera house in Belgium where Conrad attended *Tristan and Isolde* in 1894, shows a sunken orchestra, but no system of covering or concealing it from view. Thank you to Zoé Renaud in the archives division of La Monnaie for assistance.

20. See Taussig. For a discussion of how the Kongo people’s trembling bodies and music of trance became central to anticolonial resistance circa 1921, see Covington-Ward.

21. See Boon, who notes that American minimalism is partially descended from the thought of Sufi master Inayat Khan.

22. For a related discussion of old and new media in Fanon, see Allan.

23. Adrian Daub names the drawing room the “sonic hearth.”

24. Conrad published *Heart of Darkness* in the same year that Scott Joplin composed “Maple Leaf Rag” (1899), recording it for pianola.

25. For a discussion of the Veil as not simply a visual figure, but a figure for listening, see Stoever, *Sonic Color Line*. In my book-in-progress, I emphasize the Veil as being within consciousness, that through which one hears oneself.

26. The chapter immediately before the final essay on sorrow songs, “The Coming of John,” is the only fictional work in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Wagner’s *Lohengrin* gives Du Bois’s short story a stunning scene, when a dark-skinned African-American man will go to a performance and experience spiritual transcendence during the swan song. Forgetting himself, he touches the arm of a white woman and he is quickly ushered out of the theater, thrown back to the shores of racial embodiment. Du Bois first heard Wagner performed in the U.S., and then in 1936, took a much longed-for pilgrimage to Bayreuth, no doubt an intensely ambivalent experience given the era and Wagner’s well-documented racism. By positioning Wagner just before “The Sorrow Songs,” Du Bois invites us to hear these forms through each other.

27. See Stoever, who conceptually links the Veil to Pierre Schaeffer’s reception of Pythagoras, whose students, the story goes, listened to the master acoustically through a veil. Rather than accepting Schaeffer’s philosophy in this conceptual resonance, however, I would suggest that the more radical implication is to refuse it: where Schaeffer and his inheritors disavow social ecology, Du Bois can become the locus of thinking an experimental music tied up with the social fact that is race.

28. It is not clear when Du Bois first began reading Conrad, but he certainly had by 1912, when he published “The Souls of White Folk,” an essay that directly addresses atrocity in the Congo. Peter Mallios describes how the essay is a suggestive signifying upon *Heart of Darkness*, not only in its title (an obverse mirror of Conrad’s), but in beginning with an allusion

to Conrad (203). Mallios describes Du Bois's ambivalent relation to Conrad within a wider context of African-American literary reception of *Heart of Darkness* (187–217).

29. Conrad, I have argued in "A Sinister Resonance," explicitly addresses an idealized, English reader. Achebe's essay is testimony to the power of fracturing that idealization through a black reader never imagined by Conrad himself.

30. See Weheliye. Drawing from white anthologies of spirituals, Du Bois does not transcribe the cry, moan, and wail of African-American music that these early ethnographers felt could not be written. Yet the "Sorrow Songs" includes a series of "cuts" from sorrow songs that cite cries and other mournful sounds.

31. See Gilroy.

32. In a speculative ethnography, Stoever also describes the possibility of vibration within the Fisk Jubilee Singers's own sense of performance (*Sonic Color Line* 132–79).

33. See Cavarero.

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