theories and methodologies

Introduction to "Aurality and Literacy"

CHRISTOPHER CANNON AND MATTHEW RUBERY

"LISTENING IS THE NEW READING," ACCORDING TO A RECENT MARKETING CAMPAIGN BY AUDIBLE ("LISTENING"). THE SLOGAN REFERS TO THE explosive growth of the audiobook industry that has occurred over the last decade as sales of other kinds of books have flatlined or even fallen. Smartphones make it remarkably easy to listen to recorded books that were once difficult to find, pricey, and unwieldy (some of you will remember changing cassette tapes with one hand on long road trips), and much of what we only recently read on Web sites is now coming to us through podcasts. Increasingly, we write audibly, too, using virtual voice assistants like Alexa and Siri. Marshall McLuhan's prediction of a postliterate society in which people access the printed word through "ear technologies" and other media no longer seems far-fetched (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 8). It is an opportune moment, then, to reflect on the complex relations between writing, reading, and sound—an interplay that this Theories and Methodologies forum approaches through the concept of aurality.

But if listening is the new reading, it is the old reading, too. Book historians might shrug their shoulders at news of how sound technologies are disrupting the publishing industry. As Robert Darnton observed, "[F]or most people throughout most of history, books had audiences rather than readers. They were better heard than seen" (169). This is the aurality we find when we go back to the oldest known English poem, Cædmon's hymn, composed and sung by a cowherd who was himself illiterate.[1] There is a different and related aurality in the alphabet in which that hymn was eventually recorded (and that you are reading now), since, as Eric Havelock observed, it is an iterative, synesthetic miracle that a "limited set of shapes small enough to be quickly outlined by hand" captures "the linguistic noises produced by the specialized organs of the throat and mouth" (24). Friedrich A. Kittler called the faculty that hears writing in this way "alphabetized eyes," citing the example of Muhammad, who was illiterate until presented with a scroll by an archangel, whereupon he discovered he could read the text "Gabriel had already uttered

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twice as an oral command" (7). In both forms of aurality, unheard melodies are no sweeter because writing always ensures that the unheard is heard.

In this cluster, however, *aurality* is used in a third and less common sense, to refer to all the ways that writing and hearing, the outlining of shapes and speaking, are interleaved in the production and dissemination of writing. A resonant example can be found in another of our oldest writings, the moment in the Gospel of John when Jesus is "caught" writing before the temple full of scribes and Pharisees (Kelber 18). He clearly means to startle when, faced with the woman taken in adultery, he bends twice to write "with his finger on the ground" before returning to his "testimony" (*Holy Bible*, John 8.7). But he is writing to make a point: if he parodies the scribes to belittle what they do, he is also asserting an equivalence. By interposing an act of writing between all that he so memorably said, in other words, Jesus is also insisting that literacy is not an alternative to orality but its twin. I may speak or I may write, he is saying, and both are (as John had already put it) the Word (John 1.1).

We also use the term *aurality* to disrupt the traditional binary of orality and literacy, which has always been slow to recognize—and is a dyad that, in effect, came into existence to ignore—the interdependence of speaking, hearing, and writing. As Albert B. Lord had it in *The Singer of Tales*, the spoken and the written were "contradictory and mutually exclusive" (129). Walter J. Ong wrote first about the "oral residue in Tudor prose" ("Oral Residue"), but, as he elaborated the distinction between speech and writing in his still oft-cited *Orality and Literacy*, the oral and the literate were sorted into distinct "cultures," the literate succeeding the oral in a relation that almost always amounted to something like progress. When he realized he must acknowledge the increasing importance of certain kinds of orality (the telephone, radio, and television), Ong dubbed them "secondary" to the literacy characterizing that culture as a whole (*Orality* 11). Brian Stock has called such "attempts to account for the interaction of the oral and the written" a "weak thesis" (5) that explains how "speech and writing answer to different social priorities" (6). But the concept of orality itself also answered to historiographical priorities because, as Kittler also observed, it was a "technological shadow" that "came into existence only after the end of the writing monopoly" (7; see also McDowell). Its point was always to celebrate the primacy of print.

By using the term *aurality*, in other words, we wish to call attention to the constancy of sound in the production and dissemination of texts now and over time. In the case of Cædmon's hymn, for example, we want to emphasize, alongside the oral circumstances of its composition or its style, so well suited to improvisation, its intermedial relation to writing: as an account of creation taken from Genesis, Cædmon's song reworked doctrine from a book that had just been read to him. The spontaneous song that Bede celebrated in the *Ecclesiastical History* not only originated in writing, then, but, as Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe has argued, only survived in its original, Old English form because scribes who copied Bede effectively heard the Old English they knew by heart when reading a Latin paraphrase and added, alongside it, the words they could have sung themselves (40–46). Like Cædmon's song, the Gospel of John was almost certainly composed memorially and transmitted orally, at least in its initial stages, so when Jesus bends to write words in the dirt he is not only mocking the scribes in the temple but also prefiguring the latter-day decision to preserve and disseminate John's teachings as text (Kelber xxii).

Scribes continue to play a role in literary production long after the arrival of the printing press. (It is no coincidence that a popular word-processing software package

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is named *Scrivener*.) Many of Cædmon's successors, from John Milton to novelists like James Joyce, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Marcel Proust, and Stendhal, dictated their work using what may be the oldest and most enduring transcription technology: the secretary. Dictation is the simplest way to describe what any writer does when employing this technology, though it is only the most common form of the general interdependence to which we want to call attention here. The dictated text is the production of the poet or novelist as well as of a culture that is neither oral nor literate but fully and constantly both. Contrary to Ong's view of a gradual shift away from the voice and toward a print culture in which "the book was less like an utterance, and more like a thing" (125), plenty of evidence suggests that the book has always been mere breaths away from utterance.

A pivotal moment in Henry James's career exemplifies this proximity. In 1897 James switched from writing novels longhand to dictating them to secretaries because of chronic wrist pain, or "writer's cramp." Critics have found it tempting to blame the switch for the prolix style of his late fiction (including *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl*). In fact, James's amanuensis was among the first to notice how the author's style "became more and more like free, involved, unanswered talk" (Bosanquet 34). McLuhan would later cite James (with characteristic hyperbole) as an example of how the typewriter, and the secretarial labor enabled by it, influenced writing "by opening up once more the oral world to the writer of books" (as if Charles Dickens and his theatrically minded confreres had found that world shut ["Future" 175]). But it was not simply that James's writing became more like speech. His speech became more like writing, too. When he dictated his work, he spelled out words and spoke punctuation (especially commas) in a manner that would be familiar to anyone using voice-recognition software today. Although James began each day by reading the previous day's output, which he edited by hand, and although he even wrote some stories before dictating them, aurality was at work in every stage of the artistic process. Perhaps the only salient difference between dictation then and now was the sentience of the secretarial medium: as could never be the case with a computer, James was said to have been disappointed that *The Turn of the Screw* failed to frighten the man paid to write down its words.

James is hardly alone in treating dictation as equivalent to writing rather than as a distinct activity. Subsequent writers have continued to notice continuities between the two modes of composition. It was while walking along the cliffs overlooking the Adriatic Sea, for example, that Rainer Maria Rilke heard a voice call out the opening line of what would become the *Duino Elegies*: "Wer, wenn ich schriee, hörte mich denn aus der Engel Ordnungen?" ("If I cried out, who would hear me up there among the angelic orders?" [24; 25]). Although dictation is often associated with the ancients, the development of speech-recognition software means that modern writers are as likely to go the way of the apostle John as the other way around. Richard Powers recently described his own conversion to the methods of Thomas Aquinas and other authors who elected to "write by voice" (though he, too, touches up the transcription manually). Voice and writing remain intimately related—and not just at the level of metaphor—even if the vocabulary applied to voices may have changed over time from religious to psychiatric. In fact, hearing voices inside one's head is surprisingly common among authors and audiences alike (Waugh; Alderson-Day et al.). The page may be the alibi separating literary genius from schizophrenia.

Voice has also become more, rather than less, visible (or at least audible) in textual production over the last century. Whether it's poets reciting their work on stage, novelists

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recording their books, dramatists making content for radio, avant-gardists experimenting with contraptions to manipulate sound, or public intellectuals delivering their message through podcasts, we all have alphabetized eyes. Every book is already an audiobook. One of the most vivid examples of this aural embrace is a verbatim, staged reading of *The Great Gatsby* lasting over six hours that audiences, against the odds, have found riveting (*Gatz*). An updated version of Ong's narrative charting the progression from oral to print culture over the last two millennia might have that arc swerving back toward speech. Yet even this concession overlooks the persistence of voice throughout that time, even when bibliomania reached fever pitch. Today's proliferating opportunities to hear texts speak can only renew attention to what was there all along.

The concept of aurality calls for a literacy always attuned to the sonic dimensions of texts. James's insistence on spelling out words while dictating suggests how easily meaning can get lost in translation between the two modes of communication. The very term *aurality* embodies this tension since its meaning may be perfectly clear on the page while frustratingly ambiguous off it. I. A. Richards memorably expressed the homophone's equivocacy: "I think man must love confusion. Otherwise he wouldn't pronounce 'oral' and 'aural' alike" (201). But the relation between speaking and hearing may be captured rather than confounded by this sonic similarity: writing may be constituted by this confusion since sound is always crucial to understanding the genesis, meaning, and potential resonance of writing. If *orality* has had far greater traction than its counterpart up to this point in literary history, this forum points toward the benefits of shifting the balance toward *aurality*.

In what follows, a group of scholars investigate the precise relation between aurality and literacy, and by implication the constancy of sound in literary endeavors, from the many disciplinary, historical, and theoretical vantage points cultivated by sound studies. We invited contributors to think about the following lines of inquiry: How have the practices of dictation, recitation, and listening endured or evolved over time? How have sound technologies influenced the production and reception of literature? What role have the senses played in aural reception? How might class, gender, sexuality, disability, race, or other aspects of identity revise conventional understandings of literature's aurality? How can the concept of aurality alter our understanding of fundamental categories such as writing, discourse, and the text? And what implications does the rise of audio storytelling have for the future of listening?

The first essay in the cluster seeks to explain what makes some sounds in some writings especially audible. Shane Butler shows such aurality to be not so much dearly bought by the keenness of our attention as it is arresting, a sudden emergence, as if by its own accord, from the noise that surrounds us as well as from the normal muteness of the page. Butler's exploration moves back through the voice of Cicero's letters to a singular voice they record, the chatter of a little girl, a form of language that seems particularly audible because of its abstraction from sense. What appears to be an unusual kind of mediation, however, turns out to be an opportunity to question our assumptions about mediation generally, for if this little girl's voice seems unusually rich and immediate it is also exemplary—a sound that helps us understand just how aural are all texts.

As expected, close listening features prominently in this cluster. Joseph Howley illustrates how contemporary sound recordings not only restore manuscripts to speech but also restore speech to manuscripts. The Latin recordings made by the Harvard Vocarium record label between 1937 and 1941 assist audiences in hearing ancient manuscripts

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spoken aloud as well as in conceiving of those manuscripts themselves as a form of oral performance. On that note, a classicist recording Virgil's *Aeneid* manages to preserve textual variants using his voice, without recourse to elaborate textual apparatus. Auditors are therefore not merely listening to the fruits of philology; they are practicing philology while they listen.

To define the lyric as a kind of writing that was once musical, Scott A. Trudell shows us, is to ignore—or fail to "note"—the musicality of the poetry we think of as only words. Many of Shakespeare's songs are intermedial affairs that consist largely of nonreferential sounds and thus make the question of whether they were accompanied by a lute or sung to a tune irrelevant. Musicians also had a role in the making of Shakespeare's plays, writing the songs performed as part of their plots. As Trudell argues in the case of *Much Ado about Nothing*, however, to see music as somehow supplementary is to ignore the variety of compositional modes available to Shakespeare and how much the words he wrote insist that meaning is derived from sound.

Who knew that McLuhan's mother, Elsie Hall, was an elocutionist and that her performances ensured that McLuhan's earliest encounters with literature were aural? Paula McDowell uncovers that history and the ways it directed McLuhan's attention to the medium as a message long before he formulated his own theories of communication. A genealogy of those theories finds their roots in a nineteenth-century manual of elocution, which insisted on the embodied nature of the voice and informed Hall's performances and the lessons they offered her son. Although McLuhan's *Gutenberg Galaxy* was transformative, it can also be understood as the development and elaboration of Hall's own, precocious media theory. McDowell shows us that it is time for media studies to talk about founding mothers instead of founding fathers.

Writers are listeners, too. Hence, several case studies reveal how sound recording influences writing rather than the other way around. Tanya Clement's media-genealogical approach to the poetry of Anne Sexton traces how poems like "Flee on Your Donkey" emerge from Sexton's practice of listening to tape recordings of her therapy sessions. Sexton's defiant refusal to listen to the tapes in the way her therapist instructed her to suggests both the challenges and benefits of attempting to reconstruct the aurality behind an author's output. Clement's essay highlights the need for a multimodal approach capable of attending to the multiple voices and layers of mediation involved in poetic composition.

Listening to sound archives can defamiliarize the printed voice. The forensic approach taken by Tom McEnaney distinguishes between the two voices in *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, the testimony of a Guatemalan human rights activist that was recorded on cassette tapes before being transcribed and edited for publication as a book. The voice on the eighteen hours of tape recordings is very different from the assertive one we hear in the final print volume. Decisions made by the editor (who calls herself "Rigoberta's listener") about how to transcribe those tapes—to excise her own interview questions from the published transcript, for instance, and to edit Menchú's words—all shape the voice on the page. By contrast, listening to the tapes—and we are all Rigoberta's listeners, according to McEnaney—restores those telling sounds (hesitation, laughter, lapses into Quiche) that have been eliminated from the script. We are listening between the lines.

The luxuries of listening to a podcast at double time or the auto-tuned voice of a pop singer emerged from technologies developed to make reading easier for people with disabilities. As Mara Mills and Jonathan Sterne show us, in a deep dive into the history of those technologies, blind readers led the way in audio-time compression by "hacking" the

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playback rates of phonographs. Their innovations were far out in front of technologies developed for sighted readers, but those innovations show how changes in our modes of reading may be more pragmatic than aesthetic, discoveries made out of aural necessity that then expand the possibilities for reading of all kinds. Mills and Sterne honor the tradition they describe with some hacking of their own, in this case by writing their essay in two parallel columns, or "tracks," that speak to each other rather than hew to *PMLA*'s customary univocal, linear format (an innovation that required the journal's production team to modify its standard editorial practices).

When we read silently, we are still hearing voices. François Noudelmann explores these quietest of auralities by showing how philosophical understanding is also a form of listening. We must read with our ears because writing by a single thinker is still polyphonic (a chorus of voices brought together and then edited as if by a "mixing board") as well as resonant (absorbing the acoustic environment of its production), and we must also be attuned to the voices drowned out by such writing (the contradictory thoughts thinkers themselves may not quite hear). If abstraction appears to move away from the material, Noudelmann describes thought itself as a kind of movement that leaves distinctly audible traces when captured by writing.

The final essay in our forum contemplates the pedagogical implications for higher education of the renewed interest in audio storytelling. Educators ignore audiobooks at their peril. James F. English explains why their absence from university syllabi is a missed opportunity to encourage student engagement with literature. English speaks from experience: he has taught British fiction surveys using only audio editions. There are formidable challenges (including access, cost, labor, quality control, and tech support) in bringing audiobooks into classrooms designed for the use of print materials, as well as risks in outsourcing narration to third parties, since, as English observes, "every vocal performance of a novel is an interpretation, a *reading* as well as a reading out loud." But even skeptics may be willing to give MP3s a chance in the current climate of declining enrollments and waning interest in analog media. Audiobooks have a part to play in the discipline's revival and in encouraging students to recognize how aurality is, and always has been, an essential part of what makes literature speak to us.

Note

1. The earliest written version of the hymn appears as a Latin paraphrase in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* (731 CE [416–17]). The Old English version was added to a number of manuscripts of the *Ecclesiastical History*, by scribes who seemed to know the song well (Cædmon's Hymn).

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