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ABSTRACT

This is a creative response to the topic of the special issue, “The Aesthetics of Tinnitus”, blending reflections on perception and imagination, race and sociality, sci-fi and sound studies via experimental poetics.

KEYWORDS

Poetry; experimental poetics; sci-fi; race; sound

Some perceptual warmups

What do you hear that no one else hears? What points do you perceive amidst the wash of color, and what colors lose saturation the longer you look? In this scene, the figure, who comes between us to hold space for grammar, walks to the coast. One of us says, gaze split between the view and the other’s reaction to the view:

At length our walk was ended. The increasing height and boldness of the hills had for some time intercepted the prospect; but, on gaining the summit of a steep acclivity, and looking downward, an opening lay before us—and the blue sea burst upon our sight!—deep violet blue—not deadly calm, but covered with glinting breakers—diminutive white specks twinkling on its bosom, and scarcely to be distinguished, by the keenest vision, from the little seamews that sported above, their white wings glittering in the sunshine: only one or two vessels were visible, and those were far away. (Brontë 1920)

What do you feel is missing in this depiction? (We know something is missing because fiction can’t and needn’t represent reality exhaustively; one of us says the author reveals themselves in what they include, the other keeps quiet. But I don’t know how you read, whether you allow desire to join you.) For instance, what are you holding in your hands, what happens to your balance when you glance down at your hands? Does the scene emit any smells from within the frame – the air, the birds’ prey below – or outside – the road, her oil paints, a roll-up? When you draw your attention to the one or two vessels on the horizon, can you discern what language the mariners speak in your rendering of the scene? Or, if the wind and the waves are too loud, maybe the only information you can go by is the color of their skin, which also sounds, the way that some things produce noise inaudibly, are read impassively. Do you picture the scene as taking place somewhere far from where you are now, or from where you grew up? If you’re familiar with Anne Brontë’s rapturous presentations of the sea, you might be thinking about Scarborough; perhaps the north of England is very like or very unlike the place you call home, by degrees of

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latitude and longitude, history, composition, spirit. Do you read in such a way that you perceive and redress exclusions, compile a list of errata to balance the accounts of the fictive reality in question, or submit to the author's rendering, sublimate yours therein, and enjoy the array of other desires (of author, character, context)? Is this way/that way sportive or spoilsport, stymieing or critical, generative or purloining?

Supernal sounds of falling

The figure between us, who insists upon wearing rubber chappals on the cliff path, despite the craggy terrain and broken bottles of white spirit, opens the "The Scale of the Universe 2" app on their phone. They turn on the torch at the same time, creating a stereographic projection of everything, or, of everything included by the app's developers Cary and Michael Huang and of anything illuminable by the torch of your mind's eye. We know that shining this torch is the surest way to reach warp, once the cervical spine is anesthetized. The figure folds an origami swan in three-dimensional space using hypercube paper and invites us to shine our four-dimensional torch on the sphere (Degerman 2017). As we meditate on the skooshing plumage, the figure's face and voice flickers into specificity and Swami Pratyagatmananda speaks:

[A] particle is not merely impelled by external or intrinsic "strings" or stresses but dances to the tune of a hidden chord in it which thrills, maybe subconsciously, in the joy and pathos of love and yearning, craving and communion. To this Science cannot shrug her shoulders too long. If the ground is not firm to-day under her feet between her laboratory and the orchestra "hall" where the psalm of the heavens as well as of the meanest particle is "silently" sung, she will do well to hold her soul in patience and attend more closely to the "insolubles" of her laboratory solutions as they stir for an inside expression, and to the "inequities" of her academic equations as they strain for a deeper equitable reduction. Possibly sooner than later she will have to change her old charts and guides. She will have to dismiss the rocket for instance and invoke perhaps the "swimming" Swan. The rocket bursts and blasts; the Swan beckons and inspires and enlightens. (1961, 29)

In *Japasutram: The Science of Creative Sound*, a study of *vāk* [voice, sound, "Fundamental Causal Stress"] and *prāṇa* [breath, life, "the plenum of Power"], the Swami proposes an analogy between quantum physicists' experiments to determine atoms and Tantric practitioners' efforts to connect with Ātman [soul, self]. He notes that while the former is believed to be measurable (*bindu*, at some point in time) and the latter immeasurable (*nāda*, undulating as space), incommensurability is a common property between the two, and as much as the investigation reveals, the greatest revelation is how little is known, how high knowing gets us.

I like how he vouches for a syncretic approach, confident that science and mysticism can only support each other, confirm each other's ever-receding conclusions; you wonder how myth's self-constitutive timelessness is compromised by this Swami's reading. For example, how can we understand Pratyagatmananda's decision to translate *chandas* as "Creative Harmony" as well as "Relation" via his fluency in Bengali, Sanskrit, and English; his access to news and scholarly texts as a Professor of Philosophy and Mathematics; and the coordinates within which his inspiration took place in Bengal in the 1950-60s? Pratyagatmananda is evidently in awe of the new physics, admitting the ambivalence of that feeling: "We can to-day justly commend the

probity of scientific spirit and attitude, though not to the same extent the lofty 'neutrality' and 'serene' detachment of scientific temper and behavior. This latter seems to-day to be in liaison with large-scale actual or possible brutality" (1961, 33). Descending the word, to get closer to its echoes, *chandas* – which is defined as desire, incantation, and meter in the Sanskrit-English dictionary, and is possibly related to the Latin for scan, scansion (we'll drop a pin in sound, measure, and judgment) – is also described by the Swami in terms of "Rule, Norm, or Law," especially as "the law of the Joy of Love" (1961, 64). Law comes up again, the laws of cosmic becoming, the laws of attraction and repulsion, the Tantric practice of reciting the *bija* mantra [seed syllable, natural name] of a thing lawfully to make it appear. Knowing the correct pronunciation of the *bija* mantra for fire, for example, is the closest a person can get to hearing like god, sounding like god, and resounding omnipotently, i.e. bringing fire forth. The frequency of natural names is inaudible to untrained ears; to yogis it rings "in the right ear like the sound of a waterfall" (1961, 8).

This is the creative power of sound. It is also destructive – an order to drop bombs, to detonate, and every mark and utterance leading to that point, recognizing the point is both historically contingent and genealogically diffuse (Philips 2021). To whom does magical speech sing most sweetly? Who can train their ears, tongues, and arms on their willed objects? To and through whom does the power seem to flow? You tell me not to get carried away on the wings of primordial ripples and vibrating lobes; you ask leadingly about the significance of a barrister-at-law writing the appendix to *Japasutram* (his title prominent on the page): what more could a justice of the Calcutta High Court want from correct pronunciation? The figure between us, who is neither you nor me, but who serves to augment critical distance so that we can connect multiple pathways for our chats with lossless jams, spots a fascist pattern glinting in the *nāda*, the heaving, harmonious, and harnessable sound of the Causal Waters. Beyond individual actors, a doctrine of *bija* mantras depends upon stasis, sameness, and the specialness of those with direct access to the Divine Ear. Swaying on the cliff's edge, we become aware of an equation connecting the oceanic feeling with the analemnic swan, the silent songs of its variables weaving a force field to keep us safe if not steady. The music holds us in place on the edge, blocking our ears to other sounds, the sonic controls automatically leveling social dissonance – cows, kids making a racket further down the coast, bugs, the electromagnetic field – and I wonder if it's possible to conceive of a oneness that is not noise-canceling (Hagood 2019).

Wherever you are, what gives you away more, how you look or how you sound; what lets you blend in or hide the better, silence or covering up? I want to stand next to you without differentiating myself from you or our surroundings; I'm afraid to talk to you if it means words issuing like toothpicks and extending like bargepoles, keeping us apart the more I try to predict or explain. How do you feel about dissolution? The figure sets up a table of equipment to enable us to zoom in and out exponentially, objects that ground the scene and instruments that break its frame: 3D glasses, mood-rings, an extremely large telescope, bacteria quorum sensors, subspace radio, tarot cards, a particle accelerator, CGI software, Romulan ale, floating obelisks, dark matter truffle hogs, a hydrophone. When noise surrounds you, does the space expand or contract, do points destine or multiply? Where on your ego-body are you most touchable, where does skin melt into carillon, or cut glide to putrefy, i.e. join the positive infection of the common-

uncommon voice singing out of doors? Where, if anywhere, do you let it, let it come, assail differentiability; who will you swim with and in, how do your strokes sound in this snail-purple sea?

Unpredictive body-2-body

crushed shell of the murex snail says this isn't a question of perception, mostly, but questioning perception helps us go – we move with the problem of how snail says, how snail's saying is projected upon, how snail's markings, mark-makings, are obviated by hermeneutics, so that paralytic effect becomes imperial property becomes psychedelic breadcrumb –

ask too loudly how to follow the astral trail and delete neural cookies concurrently, like an improvised flight through Is-ness, and pundits step forward, so channel your questions through the microscopic snakes that swim in your waters and observe your waters' writing –

at the outset we admit the inseparability of these minds from their makers, having no consensus on the nature of mind but agreeing to the culpability of the makers, or rather their investors, or rather the historical and ideological factors that privilege some investments over others, or rather a soldering of a kind of investment (capital) with a conception of value (racial) whose strength depends on the violation and extraction of other kinds of surrounds and unds –

what then? we can try listening to the sutures, admit that listening is always mediated and it's no place to stop, whether through my selective ear or your superseded dictionary or these crepitating buds or those tritanium gales –

the differences are more-than-affective and we can feel our way to knowing something that's not an expansion of intelligence tracked to informatic raids but precipitative, a transduction of the cloud of unknowing into auroral strata –

these shades of difference can be discerned, however wide the umbrella, they can be named, however bumfly the fit, whatever brings us closer to keeping them –

then nudge keeping into the frame and fold frame into artwork, with the borders deliquesced we can hover the problem anew: as listening is always mediated, creativity is always framed; what artwork could defy or obliterate perceptual limits, how to pose that question without invoking skepticism, or simulation, or infinite regress –

such as translation-as-metaphor all the way down, or we're all GPT-3 predicting what comes next, or everything is everything is vibratile cilia –

there might be an approach that doesn't retreat to preterition or rigidity –

try another rockpool and we find ourselves on a picket line, brown and Black students and staff passing the megaphones –

drop out of wearing, no artificial
light for you, say you're not going to say
the fire that burns is a mask by which care
keeps us warm keeps us ever-touchable
the trouble with being wetware is the
return-to-sender effect of anger
whereby at becomes in, like testudo
cum sound booth come apart at the foam

like these apophatic fights make us drop
 out of range, don't negotiate with bulls
 bomb the adage that girds their strength, undue
 truths, these institutionally wrought
 defences or prostrations the only
 letters they recognize, letters of their
 making, our bodies do the same rhymes as
 before, echo makes us strong, the chorus
 a lumen or two different to hear by
 think with, it's so good you could come; when
 he said the last worry dolls hit the doors
 on their way out made the doors hit them
 back we knew what it means to make it in
 here what it takes to worry and absorb
 noise color isolates the signal
 we're here we free writing machines the next
 word sparks a scene change juxtaposition
 discovering new rooms in your body
 new friends because they can't hear they don't
 know we're getting bigger smoking them out –

Your Tumescence is the gift

These ruminations on perceptions of color as noise follow Samuel R. Delany in rejecting the hypothesis of linguistic relativity that says we can't imagine or understand things for which we don't have words; as Delany argues:

What's wrong with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is that it fails to take into account the whole economy of discourse, which is a linguistic level that accomplishes lots of the soft-edge conceptual contouring around ideas, whether we have available a one- or two-word name for it or only a set of informal many-word descriptions that are not completely fixed. . . . Discourse is a pretty forceful process, perhaps the most forceful of the superstructural processes available. It's what generates the values and suggestions around a concept, even if the concept has no name, or hasn't the name it will eventually have. It determines the way a concept is used and the ways that are considered mistaken. The following may be a bit too glib, but I think it's reasonable to say that if language is what allows us to think things, then discourse is what controls the way we think *about* things. And the second – discourse – has primacy. (2021, 119–120)

A dangerous ramification of this hypothesis is that complexity of thought becomes bound to capacity for language, when both epistemological complexity and linguistic capacity are already bound to lethal discourses of life and death, value and deprivation, subjecthood and commodification/expendability, via coinciding discourses of race, gender, class, and caste. We're troubled by language, pulled between the obligation to say and not to say, the pleasure of saying and not saying, devoted to that trouble. While it's undeniable that access to and adeptness with certain forms of language convey certain forms of power – for example, in visa and citizenship processes, dinner party conversations, legal rulings – and that language can engender a feeling of empowerment in emotional, psychoanalytical, and social justice settings, it goes without saying that language is not the sole recourse to power. It goes without saying that silence can be another way to someplace else, as can code and ciphering,

nonsense and obscurity. What happens if, instead, complexity of thought is bound to incapacity for language, for bad English, worse puns, cringey rhymes, and silly noises; or when thinking verbally meets and is diffracted by music, or when desire takes the form of a sacred syllable, or when the syllable enters the atmosphere and cracks to effect unruliness despite its sacred heart remaining unchanged, unproven to many listeners, though sonically real?

Real? the figure's eyebrows raise. I remark that in our investigations into reality, recognizability, self-awareness, and speculation, John Dee's name has come up more than once. You recall reading about him in relation to Mary Queen of Scots and finding out that he recorded a dream about a "tall black man" chopping off a white woman's hands. Were Egyptian and Ethiopian texts found in his library, mentioned in his diary? Was *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*? The everyday desolation of the Dominion War induces a psychotic break in Captain Benjamin Sisko and he wakes up in 20th-century New York City. Coming from the post-scarcity, post-racial capitalism of 24th-century Earth, Sisko's encounter with a racist society and his painful experiences of racism indicate his break with reality, according to the logic of the show. Racism is unreal in the future, and those who point it out are hallucinating, in a utopia created and produced by white men, in the mirror that pimples to meet your finger, the mercurial ocean that opens at your touch. What we heard as background noise all this time was tusky portals. The figure, who has been expanding and collapsing space all this time, standing in for grammar, i.e. for the finite arrangements of tarot, the repetition with creasing of drone, and the infinite collisions of relation, assumes the form of Jackie Wang:

[Though] oceanic experiences may be involuntary mystical experiences, it might be possible to induce (or cultivate) oceanic experiences through meditation, rhythmic breathing, psychedelic drugs, participating in a riot, fasting, sleep-deprivation, tantric sex, BDSM play, chanting, emotional pain and grief, physical pain, exercise, prayer, music, experiences of collective euphoria and any number of other activities that push one to a threshold state of consciousness. (2017, 31)

Wang traces psychoanalytical readings of the oceanic feeling: from Freud's correspondences with Rolland about religious experience and his ultimate diagnosis of the oceanic as infantile, regressive; to Kristeva's torquing of Lacan's *jouissance* toward a feminine melancholia, and her conception of a silent, temporarily liberatory space of knowing; to Milner's playful version of submerging oneself to access creativity, before surfacing to make art. Unsatisfied with the stalling notion that in its dissociations and detachments the oceanic must be antisocial, Wang translates the oceanic feeling into communist affect: "If the experience of ego loss (and the attendant feeling of being cosmically connected to the universe) has the capacity to denaturalize the individual and undo the fiction of the bounded subject, then the oceanic has the potential to open up new socialites" (2017, 22). She rereads the oceanic through Fred Moten's work on Blackness and the "ontological rupture" (2017, 26) of the sea as site of the Middle Passage: medium of crossings, forced movements, wretched-slaking touchability; archive of birth cry, keening, restive song. Moten studies the improvisation that black social life is, that many undercommon ensembles are, divulging that the unintelligibility of relation might negate certain voices and messages under the current organization of power, but that the negation itself shows where and how we can tune into each other differently.

If the oceanic feeling is “a source of ecstatic joy: a kind of *terrible gift*” (Wang 2017, 31), the experience of unbounded subjectivity changes according to whether it’s a voluntary or involuntary experience, historical or mystical, but new social rhythms and arrangements may be heard nonetheless, if we ground ourselves in feeling, thinking, and acting collectively, if we estrange ourselves in step (Suvin 2014). Remaking our world without violence, without prisons and detention centers, without racist quantifications of life and the valuation of lives requires more than imagination, but we can’t move without it. The figure holds out a squeezebox of keys: you nibble a mushroom to get there, I’ll recite mantras, and we’ll meet in Wang’s image of Rosa Luxembourg’s dream: “Alone in your cell, your body became pure nerve. You were perceiving everything” (2018, 307). They’re telling us to drop, you say, wrapping the hydrophone around your ankle as a makeshift bungee rope; a shapeshift monkey rope, I repeat after you.

A submarine sandboxing match

if the figure’s face was glitchy before, now it’s positively defrag-screening, bricks breaking into meteoric swirl; although we love each other, everyone looks white –

is it strange that all colors look and sound different underwater, the water column as kaleidoscopic tube, but whiteness remains constant in the darkness, white noise scintillating above the surface, or is it too obvious –

our words keep bubbling away from us, precision is nut-cracking down here where brains scoup spongily, but we need to air this so we can think it together: race is not a perceptual phenomenon, yet race may be perceived by the sensory organs (all of them, yes!) –

race is not a perceptual phenomenon, yet racism is frequently perceived by the sensory organs – try again – racism is frequently perceived by the sensory organs of the ones who perceive racism –

not all sensory organs have this capability, implying that some people have extrasensory perception – no way! – extrasensory perception of the mundane order –

what do people with tinnitus and yogis and poets and racialized people have in common –

like acute embarrassment, punchlines have the power to stop time –

allowing us to stay here for a while, to try some things out; say, that afore-mentioned musical diffraction, so that oceanic feeling becomes oceanic listening (we make the briefest stop for fuel at noise-canceling oneness; no need to open the doors as the platform’s so short) –

the Deep Listening Band starts playing, in a welcome if not subtle overture – can we deepen the ethical valence of listening as close listening or paying attention by conceiving of listening as openness, dissociated and absolutely attached, committed and unhurt by repeated interruptions, overwhelmed and able to rest whilst rocking –

this would entail listening across scales and sonic environments, to voice messages and ambiguous bleeps, classrooms and firmaments, briny lifeforms and arid heart-furrows, atoms and Ātman, so on and so forth –

remember the oceanic isn’t a continuous state, although it gestures toward a particulate-indivisible continuum –

we’d need to integrate the Listening-Is-Always-Mediated subroutine in the program –

the figure, sick of being forced into shapes conceivable by humans, like all those sentient noncorporeal beings in outer space, leaves us swatting in our senses and conveys Delany's argument telepathically –

For just as with the emotional extrapolations we make from poetry, the social extrapolations we make from science fiction (extrapolations from the SF text – *not* from the present) are experienced more intensely and vividly when called up by a detail, a phrase, or a single word than when ploddingly outlined in endless exposition.

Responding to the science (from physics to sociology) in science fiction is something like responding to the sounds of words in poetry. (2012, 167)

no, it's not strange that Delany frames his argument with the scene of a teacher asking her students "to pay special attention to the *sound* of 'tintinnabulation ...'" (2012, 153), we agree –

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Notes on contributor

Nisha Ramayya grew up in Glasgow and now lives in London. Her poetry collection *States of the Body Produced by Love* (2019) is published by Ignota Books. Recent projects and publications include: poems in *Ludd Gang* (<https://poetshardshipfunduk.com/about/>); a collaboration with sonic dramaturg MJ Harding performed at Wysing Polyphonic 2021: Under Ether (reviewed in *Tank*); a sequence of poems reflecting on Scotland's colonial histories in CCA Annex; and an essay-poem in response to the work of mathematician Fernando Zalamea in *audiograft*. She is currently working on a second poetry collection, tentatively called *Now Let's Take a Listening Walk*, and teaches Creative Writing at Queen Mary University London.

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