

BOOK REVIEWS

CLEMENT, Tanya E. 2024. *Dissonant Records: Close Listening to Literary Archives*. Cambridge: MIT Press. Pp. 240. ISBN 9780262548724, Paperback \$45. ISBN 9780262379236, eBook \$45.

First, let's get one thing straight: audio matters. This is the fundamental claim of *Dissonant Records*, Tanya E. Clement's important new book on sound recordings, orality, media technologies, and what is often referred to simply as *the archive*, a site still pulsing with the power relations that summoned its scraps into an archipelago of library file boxes. *Dissonant Records* asks us to take archival audio recordings seriously, even the unserious ones. It asks us to abandon the unexamined hierarchy of text up top — I'm talking paper and ink — and oral histories, readings, addresses, and just plain joshing around caught on tape down below. Clement isn't the first to make this case — indeed, there will come a day when scholars of archival audio won't feel obliged to draft apologia for the validity of their materials. Perhaps this excellent book will hasten its arrival.

Second, a word on Clement's method. She listens, closely, to these formerly unworthy recordings, and a wide range of them. She listens to taped interviews made by Ruth Sigler Avery, an amateur historian who interviews a Black woman and white men who recall the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre in starkly different ways. She listens to field recordings of folklore made by Zora Neale Hurston and Alan Lomax in 1930s Florida. She listens to a recently unearthed tape of Ralph Ellison's lecture at a Harvard literature conference in 1953, hot on the heels of a National Book Award for *Invisible Man* (1952). And much more: there are chapters on Anne Sexton's recorded therapy sessions with her psychiatrist, Dr. Martin Orne, and Gloria Anzaldúa's tapes of spiritual conversations and Tarot card readings. Clement even close-listens to a hot mic catching bell hooks eating a Butterfinger candy bar — and makes something of it. The range of this material should tell us something: that every utterance carries a quiet message, one often lost to print. Audible in the unassuming semiotics of a shy voice, a deferential tone, a guffaw, a snicker, a pregnant silence, are modes of understanding that cut across the grain of traditionally sanctified archival materials. To this end, throughout *Dissonant Records*, Clement

cites *intermedia* to frame her method of comparative listening. An intermedial approach considers recordings in concert with newspapers, historical monographs, interview transcripts, film, poetry, novels — in short, textual materials already legible to scholars and historians. Working comparatively allows her not only to devise rich analyses, but to leverage a larger claim about institutional power itself and “foreground a consideration for the synthetic, political, and ontological nature of media in the archives” (6).

So what can audio tell us that’s genuinely new? The book’s second chapter, on the Tulsa Race Massacre, is the standout work of scholarship here and a template for Clement’s method. She begins by demonstrating that the supposed silence that once surrounded the event — not only was the newspaper article that is said to have incited the massacre systematically torn from surviving copies, but there was scant printed evidence to be found anywhere (besides writing that erroneously laid blame for the “riot” at the feet of Black Tulsans) — is belied by a wealth of testimony, including hundreds of interviews with survivors that reveal a well-articulated history in wide circulation. “There is a kind of irony”, Clement writes, “in assigning ‘voicelessness’ to oppression and reiterating that premise again and again via a singular media and mode (paper and print) when so many traces of the event’s history and the voices of its survivors have been recorded on other media” (28). When she close-listens to interviews with Tulsans who recall the massacre, she finds that even this shadow history itself is inflected with power relations that require careful unpacking. For example, the white Ruth Avery’s interview with the Black Verna Price — both women witnessed the massacre as girls — exposes in its “quiet cordiality” (37) the lingering, fraught racial dynamic between these two very different Tulsans. And when Avery records the recollections of white men, a disquieting difference emerges, not only in the telling of a racist anecdote, not only in their licensed laughter and in the very volume of their voices and “overt expressions of power” (37), but also in Avery’s own silence and complicity — she even tells a racist anecdote herself. This is to say that Clement doesn’t simply supplant written records with recorded ones; rather, she listens to the audio archive against the grain of the paper one. And in its tonal nuances and conspicuous silences, she demonstrates that audio deserves the same scrutiny other forms of media routinely enjoy.

There is one caveat to her reading of the Tulsa Massacre: these hermeneutical gymnastics of comparative close-listening may end up reproducing what Saidiya Hartman in *Scenes of Subjection* (1997) calls “terrible spectacles” of violence and subjection, rooting black subjectivity

in the body and pain. So, as a card-carrying intermedialist, Clement is careful to interpolate her sources. The rest of her chapter focuses on other tellings of the Massacre, including two novels and HBO's 2019 *Watchmen* television series. While each text threatens to perpetuate the tradition of Hartman's terrible spectacles, and the notion of what Ralph Ellison calls "an easily dominated minority" (37), Clement demonstrates how Rilla Askew's novel *Fire in Beulah* (2001) depicts a Black and white female relationship that exposes some of the unspoken dynamics latent in Avery's interviews. And the *Watchmen* series offers a counternarrative that returns some agency to Black characters, as well as situates the Massacre not in the past but in a present still vibrating from the police killing of Michael Brown and the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. In the end, Clement demonstrates the value of her materials by showing how they complicate received narratives about silence, oppression, and absence that perpetuate the very problems they claim to recognize.

The other chapters in *Dissonant Records* follow up on this method. The most fascinating concerns Zora Neale Hurston's fieldwork with Alan Lomax, her making recordings of Black folklore and then being edited out of them. Hurston's method was participatory; she often encouraged performers, directing them, sometimes even joining in singing, and in the original recordings her voice (or what may be her voice; it's not always clear) can be heard. And yet in the transference of these raw recordings, first to library catalogue metadata and later into digital formatting, Hurston's contributions have been overlooked or removed entirely. Often, Lomax doesn't even mention her participation, possibly indicating a view that the young, Black, female researcher isn't worth mentioning. Even the Machine-Readable Cataloging (MARC) template used by the Library of Congress for cataloguing audio artifacts provides no recognized roles, like "director" or "active audience member", ones that Hurston often played (56). Most significant is silencing by digitization, a process in which perceived flaws in the recordings — often moments in which Hurston was, possibly, an active participant — were elided by sound editors for a "cleaner" copy. "Is this Hurston or not?" becomes a less productive question", Clement concludes, "than 'How are authenticity and authority functioning both in the moment of the recording and in the current scholarship around Hurston's Black folk work?'" (59). In the end, Clement's aim is to show how shot-through with inequities and power imbalances such materials are, and how essential it is to read them with that caution in mind.

The other chapters in Clement's book follow similar paths, listening to recorded sound and locating in the silences, ruptures, and diffidence often

exposed there what she often refers to, following Ralph Ellison's famous turn of phrase, as "the lower frequencies" of meaning. The recording of Ellison's 1953 talk at Harvard reveals instances of the great novelist being talked over, and carefully choosing his words in front of white audiences. Clement finds these tapes "riddled with resonant silences [. . .] in which traces of political and personal tensions are evident" (75). The chapter on Anne Sexton's therapy recordings fascinatingly reveals how listening to her own recorded voice in conversation with Dr. Orne occasioned reflection on her own analysis, eventually folding into the process of poetic composition itself. The tapes become a site for navigating the uncanniness of hearing her own voice and its surprising revelations — she discovers only through listening that she acts out different personalities in a trancelike state during therapy — as well as the gendered power dynamics of her male therapist and institutional psychiatry itself. Through a reading of Sexton's poem "For the Year of the Insane", Clement argues that the therapy tapes provided Sexton a means to turn from a prescribed sense of a "true self" to discover, toward a more liberated, liberating potential selfhood. (Clement does miss a chance here to situate Sexton's work in the much wider use of recording in the compositional process of poets during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s — Allan Ginsberg, Bernadette Mayer, David Antin, and many more were deeply engaged with recording this way.)

And in an extraordinary final chapter, Clement follows Gloria Anzaldúa's seven steps of *conocimiento*, a "dialogic process of knowledge production" that "values spirituality over science and rationality" (112), by laying bare her own processes of listening to audio materials in writing *Dissonant Records*. Anzaldúa's first step, *un arrebatado* (earthquake), propels one into a state of radical receptivity and liminality called *nepantla*. In a quoted passage, Anzaldúa claims that in *nepantla*, subjects "are more readily able to access knowledge derived from inner feelings" (113). Drawing on this vulnerable, self-analytical state of being to interrogate her own listening practices, Clement realizes that "being receptive" in this way "undermines the notion of authority, one voice, or of media as singular modes of engagement" (115). She follows this process of self-reflection step by step, finally subjecting her own transcription of a Tarot card reading Anzaldúa performed with another woman to careful scrutiny. Did Clement capture the aura of "in-betweenness" (134) during this encounter? She finds "there is so much that is said, so much that is silent" (145). "I can hear their embodiment and their sense of embodiment, the materiality of the moment in the space between that finger, the lightly tapped cards, the words they use to describe and understand them, and the words I use to describe and

understand *them*. To be sure, mine is a partial reading” (145). One of the hallmarks of this book is its double-focus on material and practice, text and method.

Are there snags? Sure. Clement’s introduction of audio-metaphoric terminology like *amplify*, *distortion*, *interference*, *compression*, and *reception* was more confusing than illuminating (even though it is because of her that I understand that my very term of critique, “illuminating”, draws on the visuality she is eager to evade). At times I wished for more clarity on the sentence level. I balked at the overuse of “agential”. And, having spent some time in the audio archive, I recognize at moments in this book (the Ellison chapter in particular) that the allure of reporting on recovered voices may overlook the truth that some recordings aren’t as instructive as others.

In a brief coda, Clement reveals that one of her manuscript’s reviewers was “dismayed” (150) that she didn’t include discussion of her other major research work, *distant listening*.¹ Besides being Associate Professor in English at the University of Texas, Austin, Clement also leads High Performance Sound Technologies for Access and Scholarship (HiPSTAS), which analyzes large caches of audio material using digital tools. Clement offers a both/and answer to this criticism. I am entirely glad for what she’s done, and for what she hasn’t.

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Works Cited

CLEMENT, Tanya. 2020. “Distant Listening and Resonance”. *ESC: English Studies in Canada*, 46.2–4: 279–84.

1. See CLEMENT 2020.