ZADIE SMITH: THE ONCE AND FUTURE HARLEM

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READINGS

[Essay]

SOUNDING THE WORD

By Charles Bernstein, from the foreword to Audio-books, Literature, and Sound Studies, *edited by Matthew Rubery, out this month from Routledge. Bernstein is a founder of PennSound, an online archive of poetry sound files. His essay "Recantorium" appeared in the January 2009 issue of* Harper's Magazine.

And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice [*phōnē*], but seeing no man.

—Acts 9:7, King James Version

Last summer, 133 years after Edison made the first sound recording, of "Mary Had a Little Lamb," the *New York Times*, which published its first issue just twenty years before the invention of the gramophone, described Woody Allen, who had just released some audiobooks, as an "adopter of cutting-edge technology." In the introduction to a brief interview with Allen publicizing the release of the audiobooks of his "humorous essays," Allen himself turned the unintended comedy of this remark into farce: "I don't own a computer, have no idea how to work one, don't own a word processor, and have zero interest in technology."

Allen is not alone in blithely discounting the fact that the alphabet and the book are themselves technologies, even relatively new technologies, depending on your time frame. Certainly the Greek phonetic alphabet, at about 2,500 years old, is still on the newer end of human history. But Woody is speaking in straight lines, not time lines. He gives the impression that audio recordings are a recent invention, more recent than the television technology that gave him his start in the biz or the movies he grew up watching and with which he fell in love. One of Allen's first jobs was writing scripts for the likes of Sid Caesar. His own early scripted monologues were released on 33⅓ rpm LPs. Here's Allen (*Woody*, not *Gracie*) via a cutting-edge alphabetic transmission system, email: "I can only hope that reading out loud does not contribute to the demise of literature, which I don't think will ever happen."

Maybe not, now that poetry and theater have survived the demise of orality brought by the advent of alphabetic writing. The presence of the word seemed to come through despite script's absence of presence. (My worry is not the absence of presence in writing but the presence of absence in presence.)

The story inevitably goes back to Homer: did alphabetic transcription spoil the oral epic, which was the culmination of a very sophisticated technology for storage and retrieval of cultural memory via reperformance and variation?

Is the *Iliad* the first novelization?

Woody's not *that* troubled (the italics is a script code to tell you that if you read this out loud you should give an extra emphasis to *that*, pausing slightly before it). Literature, he notes, somehow survived the audio recordings of poetry he heard on Caedmon records, and he rather likes those LPs, as long as we remember they were a "little treat" that did not "encroach" on the mastery of the texts themselves. ("Literature," after all, comes from the Latin word for "letter.")

Don't get me wrong: *I love Woody*. So I find it funny—his clinging to such a literal understanding of *literature*, as if verbal art had been joined at the hip to the new (depending on your time line) Silent Reading User Interface (SRUI). (Saint Augustine is credited with the first citing of SRUI, about 1,600 years ago.) But Woody Allen's point, amid the strategic technophobia, is that he wrote his books for SRUI, not as a script to be performed and listened to on an LP record or cassette tape or compact disc or VHS tape or digital versatile disc, or RealAudio, Audio Interchange, or Moving Picture Experts Group file format:

> The discovery I made was that any number of stories are really meant to work, and only work, in the mind's ear and hearing them out loud diminishes their effectiveness. Some of course hold up amusingly, but it's no fun hearing a story that's really meant to be read . . .

And one might say, equally, that it's no fun reading a script meant to be performed, as for example the sheet music for "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" or the printed version of *Iphigenia in Aulis*. One can well imagine Mr. Euripides being a bit put out by the paperback translation of his play that I read in college. I mean, how can you really appreciate Euripides except in Greek? (I wouldn't know.) Or is everything in lit'ra'ture either a transcription (both in the musical sense and in the sense of a textual version of somethin' spoken) or a translation or transcreation (as Haroldo de Campos puts it) or a traduction (Pound's term) or remediation or, well, you get my drift.

Let's switch back over to Woody Live:

> Which brings me to your next question, and that is that there is no substitute for reading, and there never will be. Hearing something aloud is its own experience, but it's hard to beat sitting in bed or in a comfortable chair turning the pages of a book, putting it down, and eagerly awaiting the chance to get back to it.

There is no substitute for substitution either, or another way to say it is that everything is substitution, including the metaphoric senses of *substitution*. There is no translation like the original, and the original is the remediated trace of the unknowable.

In other words: If everything is translatable, nothing is.

And verse vica.

I love originality so much I keep copying it.

So why the valorizing (*"You just said the secret word!"*) of one technology over another, or why this neoliberal nostalgia that the technology in which you invest your Symbolic Aura Dollars (SAD) is not a technology at all but the Real Deal? Is printed matter the gold standard of lit'ra'ture? (—If you say so, buddy.)

It's so very Old Testament: the law as immutable scripture and all that. Not muttered and mutable sound. But even the New Testament is old news now.

The term *audiobook* is vexatious, and that may be its allure. The etymology of *book* suggests a written document (tablet or sheets); in this sense an audiobook is not a book at all. The book is a writing-storage device that usually includes an audio dimension—the implicit sound of phonetic script (*phonotext* is Garrett Stewart's term). Retrievable sound recordings, which used to be

[Memo]

DOPE BEATS

From a letter sent last year to parents of students at Mustang High School in Mustang, Oklahoma.

Dear Parents,

We wanted to make you aware of a concern we have with a new fad among young people called I-Dosing, also known as digital drugs. The trend involves downloading an MP3 that uses binaural brain-wave technology. The technology works by using two tones in close frequency, one in each side of a set of headphones. The different tones combine to create a beat frequency, which alters brain waves. The apps can be downloaded, often for a fee, to many cell phones and MP3 players.

Sites promoting the binaural brainwave technology claim there are no dangers to listening to the "doses." However, some students who listened to one of these MP3s exhibited the same physical effects as if they were under the influence of drugs or alcohol, including increased blood pressure, rapid pulse, and involuntary eye movements. Two students reported auditory and visual hallucinations.

Based on the physiological effects, we are concerned about this phenomenon. Please talk to your children about the dangers around them, including the potential dangers from things that are promoted as being perfectly safe.

Thank you,
Bonnie Lightfoot
Superintendent

called *records*, then *tapes*, then *discs*, are now, in the most generic sense, called *audio files*.

The published, packaged, freestanding audiobook will, as media history goes, have had a relatively short shelf life. As a term of art, *audiobook* suggests, first, books on tape; the moniker seems hardwired to the cassette (1963–2003) and averse to poetry. I have often thought, walking into a Barnes & Noble superstore and glancing over the audiobooks section: "We blew it!" (We being a somewhat hysterical identification with poetry.) Books on tape are now primarily on CD (1982–2015) or downloaded via MP3 (1994–2018). While the recorded (non-singing) voice can be stored and played in many formats, it's a safe bet to say digital files—streamed or downloaded or broadcast—will dominate in what I like to call "the coming digital presence." Amazon's category is "Books on CD," and their bestsellers include a number of distinct genres: mysteries (Stieg Larsson is huge), thrillers, classic fiction, new novels, New Age, self-help, political memoir (Tony Blair versus Barack Obama), and motivationals (Dale Carnegie is still influencing people). The historical novelty of audiobooks is not the technology itself but the proliferation of multi-hour recordings in these genres.

Crude but useful demarcations can be made between sound art, poetry, fiction, and non-fiction audiobooks: the terms overlap (I always say poetry is non-fiction), but the boundaries are explicit. The other broad demarcation I'd make is between recordings made by the author and those performed/recited by someone else (*actor* by definition, *reader* the term of art). After listening to Yeats reciting "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," a student, used to audiobooks, suggested we give no more authority to Yeats's reading of his famous poem (albeit recorded decades after he wrote it) than we might give to another reader/performer/actor or even impersonator (I do a mean Yeats impression). This is a little like saying the Pope's prayers amount to nothing more than those of any other parishioner. Pretty to think so, perhaps, but God surely pays special attention to the Pope, and I advised the student to pay just such special attention to Yeats doing Yeats.

On a computer, the same digital code produces the alphabetic letters on the screen and the voice sound coming through the speakers. (For the real experience of *this* script, play it on your computer's voice reader and set "Ralph" for a rate of 35, pitch of 36, intonation of 82. The piece is about 1,900 words and runs about fifteen minutes as audio.)

From its invention to right *now* (only that now was months or years ago), one of the alphabet's primary uses was *transcriptive*: script to be read out loud (in a play or a newscast) or translation/evocation of speech. (*Lyric*, the double of *transcriptive*, has two complementary meanings; lyric means both the script of words to be sung and a poem that evokes utterance in its words alone.)

Textuality, sounded, evokes orality.

Textuality is a palimpsest: when you scratch it you find speech underneath. And when you sniff the speech, you find language under that.

The alphabet is frozen sound.

So is the audiobook and all tape-recorded voices.

While the alphabet has to evoke the full range of human voice in just thirty or so characters (including punctuation marks), the audio recording provides a much thicker evocation of tone, pitch, rhythm, intonation, and accent.

Unlike "live" performance, gramophony is a textual experience: you hear it but it doesn't hear you. Like writing, the audio voice is always a voice that conjures the presence of the speaker but marks the speaker's absence. For this reason, all voice recording is on some fundamental—if usually subliminal—level ghostly. The voice of the dead speaking as if alive. Or alive one more time.

Is the long car ride the necessary condition for the business model of the audiobook in our time?

Take my wife.

(Please.)

Susan Bee tells me that on a long solo car trip she was listening to Frank McCourt's reading of his *Angela's Ashes* and that she had to pull off the road because she found herself weeping. Marjorie Perloff tells me a story of listening to a download from PennSound, with our low-rent recordings, and, hearing the siren of a fire engine, pulling off the road before realizing it was an extraneous sound on the recording.

There are only two kinds of writing: sound writing and unsound writing.

Sound is always the ingenue at the media party.

Sound is grace. We don't earn it, but it is forever there for us, in its plenitude, as the social-material dimension of human language.

Its fleece was white as snow.