

Poetry Audio Lab: Modernism & Sound Studies

Dr. Chris Mustazza

Fall 2019

Tuesday/Thursday, 4:30-6:00pm, Fisher-Bennett Hall 141

Office Hours: Wed/Thurs 12-1pm and by appointment, 366 McNeil Building

Course Description

What does Modern poetry sound like if we approach it through sound recordings of poets reading their own work? What kind of works that are primarily sound-based (e.g. vaudeville monologues) would have to be included? Which poets would not be audible due to their lack of access to (or interest in) making recordings of their work? The course takes up this provocation by organizing itself around listening exercises, making extensive use of the PennSound archive. The primary goal of the course will be to provide students with the tools and resources to do critical work that focuses on poetry as sound.

Many of the course assignments will center hands-on work with sound files: recording podcast discussions of poetic readings, making audio remixes and collages, and setting poems to music, to name a few. No prior experience with sound editing is necessary—just an interest in experimenting with sound.

We will learn about several Sound Studies methodologies for analyzing these poetic performances; they include Close Listening, Distant Listening, Machine-Aided Close Listening, and media archaeology (the study of how older media, in this case wax cylinders and shellac 78rpm records, functioned socially, politically, and aesthetically). The aim will be for you to be able to discuss poetic performances with careful attention to the literary historical, biographical, aesthetic, and medial frames that constitute these historical objects.

You will notice that the title of the course does not contain the word “American,” even though the course focuses on the development of modernism in America. This is because the development of poetry in America during this period of global poetic innovation must be heard in an international context. So while the course focuses on American poetry, we will listen carefully to how modernism vibrated in transatlantic sympathy, as well as through the Americas. Too, you will notice that the course includes works outside the period of modernism (roughly 1890-1945). To fully apprehend the poetic innovations taking place during this time, it is necessary to study the earlier periods that these radically experimental poets are reacting to, as well as how the works of this period mark important inheritances (and not just positive ones) for contemporary poets.

Course Policies

Attendance - Most of the work for this course happens in our discussions, so attendance is crucial. There is one excused absence permitted for the term. Please do come and talk to me if you need to miss more than one class; I would be glad to discuss this with you based on your need. Each unexcused absence beyond the first will result in a 1/6-letter-grade deduction to the final grade (e.g. 2 unexcused absences would decrease an A- to a B+). If you miss six or more classes, you cannot pass the course.

* **Participation** – It is my hope that everyone will participate substantively in the discussions we have in class, and I will do my best to make the environment welcoming and collegial. Given that much of the learning in the course happens during our conversations, 15% of the grade is dedicated to participation. That said, I understand that this kind of extemporaneous discussion is not everyone's preferred mode of interaction. As such, the blog posts can also function as participation in the course. If you don't speak as much in the seminar but thoughtfully comment on others' posts, this may satisfy the requirement. There will be times when we go around the room so everyone has a chance to speak, and the blog posts you write can be the basis for what you say.

* **Laptops** – Bringing your laptop (if you have one) to every class is encouraged. There will be many times when we need to look up information or listen to material, based on the conversation we are having. I do reserve the right to ask everyone to close their laptops so we can focus directly on the conversation. If you don't have a laptop, please check with me and I can inquire into whether borrowing one is possible.

Grading

- * Four audio projects @ 10% each – 40% in total
- * Final project – 25% (includes proposal, project itself, presentation, and discussion of others' projects)
- * Blog posts – 20%
- * Participation – 15%

Late assignments will be downgraded by 10% per day. Please talk to me if you have extenuating circumstances, and we can discuss.

Required text

- * *Handholding: 5 Kinds* by Tracie Morris – [Available from press](#). (We start using this text in October)
- * *Motion Studies* by Jena Osman – Some copies available at the Penn Book Center or [online](#).

Optional text – will not be covered in class

- * *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* by Peter Nicholls ([Amazon](#))

Final Project

The final project is a significant research exercise where you will apply the knowledge you learned over the course of the term to contributing to scholarship on the performed poem. You are encouraged to design a project that is most useful to you and your intellectual interests. Nursing students in the course have done work on sound and disability, and musicians have done musical analyses of works, for example. Here are some potential ideas:

- 1) Audiotextual Bibliography – select a record of poetry recordings and write a critical review of it. Use Library resources to track down the record itself, any information on the conditions of its production (e.g. who recorded it and why?), whether it was part of a series, etc. How are the poems read by the poet representative – or not – of their overall body of work? What performance choices surprised you (e.g. in terms of intonation, tempo) and which did you feel followed your expectations from the text? What do these recordings teach us about the poet that we wouldn't be able to

apprehend if we only read the texts? A final paper of 8 double-spaced pages that embeds audio from the recordings as evidence will be the final product.

2) Proposal for a Distant Listening Experiment – Imagine a question you would pursue using Distant Listening methods. Recall that Distant Listening is a methodology of large scale, using a computer to “listen” to many hours of audio and to help us perceive questions outside the scope of human perception. Do First-Wave modernist poets perform differently than Second-Wave modernists? If so, what performance characteristics separate the two? Do female poets receive more, less, or the same amount of applause than male poets during a particular historical period? Write a critical statement describing why your question is worth pursuing, what you expect to find, and what metadata you would need to make it work. Ground this explication in your knowledge about particular poets who will be included in your dataset, including their statements of poetics and any relevant biographical information.

3) Audio essay – record yourself discussing a comparative reading between two recordings of a poem (it can be two recordings of the same poem, or two completely different poems). Edit in excerpts from the poems as your evidence. The full recording should be about 10 minutes long. Listen to your recording when it is complete, and write a 250-word statement about *your* performance choices in your discussion—what were the properties of your voice, who did you imagine as your audience, how would you describe the poetics of your own approach (vis-à-vis the poetics that we studied in the course)?

Content Warnings

There are a couple of places on the syllabus where I mark content warnings. This is because of the way select materials interact with topics such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and violence. Please contact me if you would rather not experience any of the marked materials and we can find an alternative.

Tentative Schedule

Week 1 – Introductions & Intro to Close Listening

August 27 –

- Introductions, syllabus review, about PennSound, collective close listening exercise

August 29 – Close Listening

- read introduction to Charles Bernstein’s *Close Listening*
- listen to CL introduction [performed by synthetic voices](#)
- listen to Bernstein’s “1-100”

Blog post: What is Bernstein arguing for and against in the introduction to *Close Listening*? What does he see as the relationship between performance and the written text of a poem? What are some of the challenges of studying the performed poem vs. the written poem?

Week 2 – Lyric Traditions & The Tradition-less Future

September 3 – Lyric Traditions

- listen to Alfred Noyes performing “The Highwayman”
- Jerome McGann performs Edgar Allan Poe
<http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/McGann-Poe.php>
- listen to Susan Howe read Emily Dickinson
- readings on Modernism

September 5 – Il Futurismo

- listen to “The Futurist Manifesto” performed by Bernstein and read along
- read “The Art of Noise” by Luigi Russolo
- read “Aphorisms on Futurism” by Mina Loy
- read excerpt from Marjorie Perloff’s *The Futurist Moment*

Creative Adaptation Assignment: record your own Futurist reading of “Aphorisms on Futurism” and write a 250-word accompanying statement that discusses how your performance choices were inflected by the poetics you read. You can hear Marinetti & Russolo reading in Italian here, if you want a sense of how they read their work.

Week 3 – High-Modernism, Part I: Breaking the Pentameter

September 10 – Ezra Pound

- read “A Few Don’ts By An Imagiste”
- read about Imagism
- listen to “Sestina Altaforte,” “The Seafarer,” and “Cantico del Sole”
- listen to the PoemTalk episode on “Cantico del Sole”
- **CONTENT WARNING:** Listen to Pound’s radio speeches in support of Mussolini

September 12 – Women of the First Wave

- listen to Harriet Monroe recordings at PennSound
- look at scans of early issues of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*
- read selection of poems by H.D. and Amy Lowell
- listen to Marianne Moore recordings

Week 4 – Dialect Poetry & Performed Speech

September 17 – James Weldon Johnson, Dialect, & Sermons

- read preface to *God’s Trombones*
- listen to/read “The Creation” and “Go Down, Death”
- read the lyrics to “Under the Bamboo Tree,” cowritten by JWJ for a Tin Pan Alley musical
- watch Judy Garland perform “Under the Bamboo Tree” in *Meet Me in St. Louis*
- listen to the Rev. A.W. Nix perform “Black Diamond Express to Hell”
- read about race records

September 19 – Dialect Poetics of the Americas

- read about Louise Bennett
- listen to/read Louise Bennett poems, including “No Lickle Twang,” and “Colonization in Reverse”

- read about Mikey Smith
- listen to/read “Mi Cyaan Believe It” and “It a Come”

Week 5 – Nation Language & Audio Workshop

September 24 – Claude McKay & Nation Language – **Class taught by Knar Gavin**

- read about Claude McKay
- listen to/read “If We Must Die”
- listen to/read “Tropics in New York”
- read excerpts from *Constab Ballads*
- read Brathwaite’s History of the Voice
- read/listen to “Parsley” by Rita Dove
- **CONTENT WARNING:** Read about The Parsley Massacre
- read McGann on deformance

September 26 – **Audio Workshop taught by Chris Vandegrift**

- listen to Cassandra Gillig’s *Put Me in Charge of POETRY Magazine*

Week 6 –

October 1 – Poetry Audio Listening Workshop

Remix Assignment Due – Posted to Discussion Forum

- we will listen to the remixes and discuss how they operate, on their own and in relation to the materials that were deployed/detourned
- we will start planning podcast assignment

October 3 – Doin’ Voices – (The Higher) Vaudeville

- read about vaudeville
- **Content Warning:** listen to “The Congo”
- listen to “The Daniel Jazz”
- listen to “The Mysterious Cat”
- listen to “Bryan, Bryan, Bryan”
- listen to Fanny Brice
- listen to Cal Stewart
- listen to excerpt from *Life with Luigi*

Week 7 – Podcast Recording; Fall Break

October 8 – Recording Podcasts

MEET AT KELLY WRITERS HOUSE

- listen to Claude McKay *PoemTalk* with an ear toward structure

October 10 – **NO CLASS (Fall Break)**

Week 8 – Stop Making Sense: Dada & Russian Futurism

Sunday, October 13 - Podcast Assignment Due

October 15 – Schwitters’ Dada and Sound Symbolism

- listen to Kurt Schwitters *Ursonate* and follow along on score
- listen to Tracie Morris’ “handholding” with Schwitters
- read about Hugo Ball & read “Karawane” & “Gadji Beri Bimba”
- listen to the Talking Heads perform “I Zimbra”
- read the Dada Manifesto

October 17 – Russian Futurism & Library Session – **SAM KIRK VISIT**

- read about zaum
- read Velimir Khlebninov and Vladimir Mayakovsky
- listen to Bernstein perform “Incantation by Laughter”
- read about defamiliarization

Week 9 – Gertrude Stein & Her Afterlives

October 22 – Stein’s Syntax

- listen to Stein collection at PennSound
- watch dance video of “If I Told Him”
- read excerpts from Stein’s poetics
- read excerpts from *Tender Buttons*, including “A Carafe that is a Blind Glass”

October 24 – Stein’s Afterlives

- read excerpt from “Melanctha”
- read Tracie Morris’ handholding with Stein
- listen to audio from Morris’ handholding with Stein

Week 10 – Poetry’s Impasse; Scientific Methods

October 29 – Mr. Eliot’s Wild Ride

- read about T.S. Eliot
- read and listen to *The Waste Land*
- read Jason Camlot on performances of *The Waste Land*

October 31 – Scientific Methods of/& Poetry

- read Jena Osman’s *Motion Studies*
- excerpt from Patrick Feather’s *Pictures of Sound*
- watch “The Ghost in the MP3”

Sunday, Nov 3 – Record Review Assignment Due

Week 11 – Modernist Distance & Resistance to Modernism; Listening at Distances

- November 5 – William Carlos Williams / Visualizing the Poem; Distant Listening
- read/listen to poems from WCW, including “To Elsie,” “The Defective Record,” “Between Walls,” “This is Just to Say,” and excerpts from *Spring and All*
 - read Tanya Clement
 - try out digital tool to compare readings of WCW’s “To Elsie”

- November 7 – Anti-Modernists(?) & Distant Listening
- read and listen to Edna St. Vincent Millay, including “The Ballad of the Harp Weaver,” “Recuerdo,” and “First Fig”
 - listen to Johnny Cash perform “The Ballad of the Harp Weaver”
 - read/listen to Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall”
 - look at Machine-Aided Close Listening of “Mending Wall”
 - read posts from *Clipping at Jacket2* about Distant Listening

Week 12 – Blues & Spirituals

- November 12 – Blues (Poetry)
- listen to Ma Rainey
 - listen to Leadbelly performing “Black Girl”
 - listen to Nirvana’s “Where Did You Sleep Last Night?” (cover of Leadbelly)
 - read/listen to Sterling A. Brown
 - read/listen to Langston Hughes
 - read Marit MacArthur on “Poet Voice”

- November 14 – African-American Spirituals & Work Songs; Machine-Aided Close Listening
- read excerpt of intro to James Weldon Johnson’s *The Book of American Negro Poetry*
 - listen to later recordings of “Go Down, Moses,” “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” “Roll, Jordan, Roll”
 - read James Weldon Johnson’s “O Black and Unknown Bards”
 - listen to “Hammer Song”
 - listen to Sam Cooke’s “Chain Gang”
 - listen to Tracie Morris’ answer to “Chain Gang”

Week 13 – Populist Modernism, Labor Songs & Second-Wave Modernism

- November 19 – Populist Modernism & Labor Songs
- read about Wobblies (IWW) & the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire
 - read/listen to Carl Sandburg
 - read/listen to “Solidarity Forever”
 - excerpts from Muriel Rukeyser’s *Book of the Dead*
 - read/listen to excerpts from Edgar Lee Masters’ *Spoon River Anthology*

- November 21 – Second-Wave Modernism
- read/listen to Charles Reznikoff’s “Amelia”
 - read Louis Zukofsky’s homophonic translations of Catullus
 - listen to Paul Robeson performing “Ol’ Man River” and “Joe Hill”; read lyrics to each

Week 14 – Media Archaeology of Sound

November 26 – Pictures of Sound

- finish Patrick Feaster's *Pictures of Sound*
- listen to sound examples from the book
- in-class, materials texts exercise with historical audio materials (wax cylinders, early records)
- sign up for a day to present your final project (Tues or Thurs of final week)

November 28 – **NO CLASS (Thanksgiving)**

Week 15 – Wrap-Up & Final Projects

*** December 2 - Final Projects Due – Posted to Canvas Discussion Board**

December 3 – Final Project Presentations & Bonus Tracks

- listen to Jaap Blonk
- listen to Amiri Baraka
- listen to Anne Waldman
- listen to Gwendolyn Brooks

December 5 – Final Project Presentations & 2020 KWH Fellow Readings

We will divide the class time evenly and go around the room so everyone can informally explain their final project, and show some excerpts from it.