Transmotion
Vol 10, No 1 (2024)
DOI: 10.22024/UniKent/03/tm.1194
Pp. 1-25
CC-BY 4.0
ISSN 2059-0911

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# "Sound and Form: Listening to Affective Forms in the Soundscapes of Tanya Tagaq's *Split Tooth*"

ERIN CHESLOW

Floating on the ice, the unnamed narrator of Tanya Tagaq's *Split Tooth* (2018) stories her world in terms of a complex soundscape that, though ever-present, cannot be formally represented by language. Moving through domestic spaces full of loud music and drunken laughter, as well as nonhuman spaces that seem sublimely silent but are shown to speak in sometimes unpredictable ways, Tagaq's formally ambiguous text refuses to structure sound by representing it in textual forms like dialogue or mimesis. Instead, it builds a world filled with sounds that ask the reader to listen to not only the content—the actual words—but also the form, that which is not directly communicated. In one of her more surreal yet visceral descriptions of wandering on the ice, the narrator transforms a whiteout into a chaotic ecosystem of sound and, often violent, sensation. Cutting away her own flesh to eat, her naked body numbed by the extreme cold, she

gains strength and life through the experience of sound. Under a sun that "talks to my throat in recognition," she swims in an ocean that "is calling my name" (Tagaq 92). As she describes the speech of polar bears who come to swim alongside her, "It's an indecipherable language but I am aware they are attempting to comfort me" (93). She listens though she does not understand, signaling an affective relationship to form and sound. That which is indecipherable, unrepresentable in text, gains form relationally in the act of listening.

Using an approach that considers reading as a form of listening, I argue that the unrepresented soundscape of Tagaq's narrative refigures sound as affective form. By reading form—the modes by which a text represents the world and the human/nonhuman relations within it—not for what it *can* represent but for the ways in which it reveals the traces of what cannot be represented by human language, I view genre as an invitation to work through the layers of experience that are not readily available, the ways in which relationships that are not visible in the text are structured. These affective registers, the experience of closeness to the world in the text, are made available through an aesthetic rejection of speech that aligns with Sara Ahmed's elaboration of the "nonperformative," or "the failure of the speech act to do what it says" (105). For both Tagaq (Inuk) and Ahmed, speech is a liberal, settler ideal that ultimately negates action by standing in for it: "the nonperformative does not 'fail to act' because of conditions that are external to the speech act: rather, it 'works' because it fails to bring about what it names" (Ibid). In contrast to oral textual practices that participate in the structuring of actionable sociality—like Tagaq's throat singing or the use of sound and story in law or medicine—liberal speech is intentionally empty. Its failure is what makes it effective and allows it to dominate public discourse in neoliberal settler states like the United States and Canada, where ongoing occupation of Indigenous land and liberal ideals of freedom and inequality are in constant tension. Expressions of sympathy, solidarity, recognition, and (re)conciliation imbue personal speech with a false affect that makes it seem as if systemic change has occurred in the

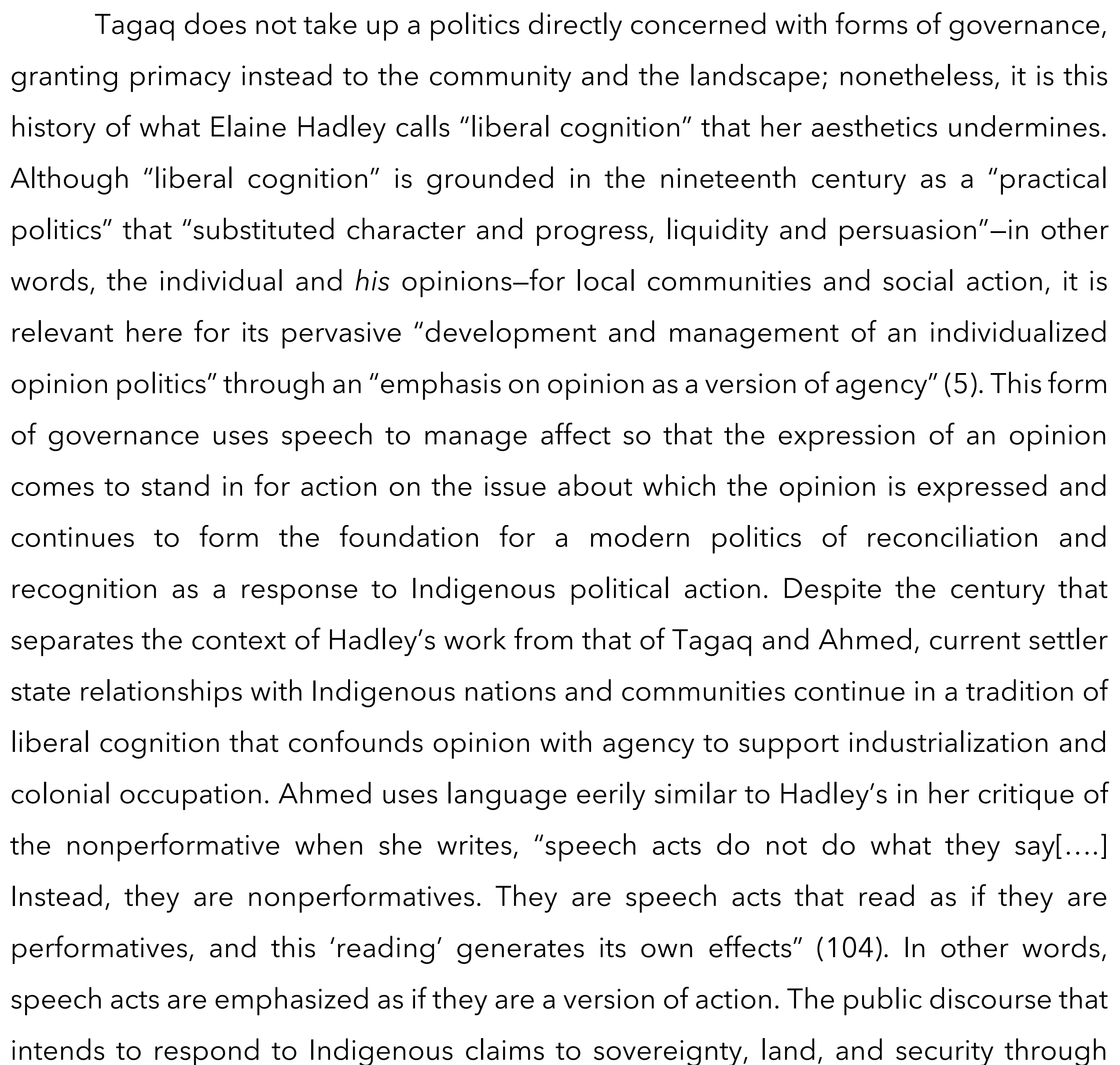
*Transmotion*
Vol 10, No 1 (2024)
DOI: 10.22024/UniKent/03/tm.1194
Pp. 1-25
CC-BY 4.0
ISSN 2059-0911

moment of expression. New forms—new ways of being, thinking, telling stories—become necessary to imagine otherwise.

As a settler scholar, I approach these forms with the intention of crafting new practices of being in relation. I work on the lands of the Peoria, Kaskaskia, Peankashaw, Wea, Miami, Mascoutin, Odawa, Sauk, Mesquaki, Kickapoo, Potawatomi, Ojibwe, and Chickasaw nations, land currently occupied by the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. My academic pursuits have routed me through the lands of the Kanaka Maoli of Hawaiʻi and Māori of Aotearoa New Zealand, where my research relations primarily lie. Grounded in these roots and routes, my research centers the situated contexts in which Indigenous communities have entered into (uneven) relationships with settlers. I work across different spaces of colonial encounter to develop an understanding of form that spans spatial, temporal, and colonial boundaries and opens space for settler modes of relation outside of extractivist and colonial ethics. I read, and listen to, Tagaq from this positionality and attempt to attend seriously to the epistemologies she offers as models for thinking and being in the world.

Within an Indigenous aesthetics that engages the landscape (and soundscape) "to imagine and create an elsewhere in the here" (Martineau and Ritskes iv), texts like Tagaq's use form and sound to reject easy decipherability and weave together ways of thinking and being that are always present but often invisible or ignored. They ask us to listen to what is not obvious instead of consuming based on what we already know. *Split Tooth* rarely offers overt depictions of sound like dialogue or onomatopoeia. Rather, soundscapes that cannot be directly experienced or even imagined by the reader permeate the spaces of the text. The reader must meet the text halfway, acting through listening, rather than taking the words themselves to be action. On its own, reading, or speaking, is treated as a form of performance, but one that is "nonperformative" in Ahmed's sense of the term. Both reading and speaking, along

with the text itself, "are not 'finished' as forms of action, as what they 'do' depends on how they are 'taken up'" (Ahmed 105). The nonperformativity of speech and text allows them to be seen as actions, but the two must be disentangled for speech to be once again actionable, to be "taken up" and acted upon. Ahmed writes specifically about the nonperformativity of antiracist speech, but her work fits into a longer tradition of colonial governance, in which sympathy permits violent conquest and reconciliation replaces economic, social, and political change.



Tagaq does not take up a politics directly concerned with forms of governance, granting primacy instead to the community and the landscape; nonetheless, it is this history of what Elaine Hadley calls "liberal cognition" that her aesthetics undermines. Although "liberal cognition" is grounded in the nineteenth century as a "practical politics" that "substituted character and progress, liquidity and persuasion"—in other words, the individual and *his* opinions—for local communities and social action, it is relevant here for its pervasive "development and management of an individualized opinion politics" through an "emphasis on opinion as a version of agency" (5). This form of governance uses speech to manage affect so that the expression of an opinion comes to stand in for action on the issue about which the opinion is expressed and continues to form the foundation for a modern politics of reconciliation and recognition as a response to Indigenous political action. Despite the century that separates the context of Hadley's work from that of Tagaq and Ahmed, current settler state relationships with Indigenous nations and communities continue in a tradition of liberal cognition that confounds opinion with agency to support industrialization and colonial occupation. Ahmed uses language eerily similar to Hadley's in her critique of the nonperformative when she writes, "speech acts do not do what they say[….] Instead, they are nonperformatives. They are speech acts that read as if they are performatives, and this 'reading' generates its own effects" (104). In other words, speech acts are emphasized as if they are a version of action. The public discourse that intends to respond to Indigenous claims to sovereignty, land, and security through

Vol 10, No 1 (2024)
DOI: 10.22024/UniKent/03/tm.1194
Pp. 1-25
CC-BY 4.0
ISSN 2059-0911

reconciliation and inclusion mirrors liberal cognition's use of opinion, or empty acts of speech, to manage individual agency.

**Relational Sound**

In both her music and *Split Tooth*, Tagaq contends directly with these empty acts of speech through sound. Her aesthetics is located within a larger tradition that understands indigeneity and sound as radical alterity to colonial, liberal cognition. Because she makes sound visible through the relationships between her music and her writing, she also exemplifies the ways in which the "aesthetics of survivance" that Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe) identifies as linking diverse Indigenous creative practices is always already sounded. For Vizenor, survivance is Native presence, what might be read as not only physical presence on the land but also a specifically aesthetic presence that acts in opposition to colonial simulations of action. He uses the word "simulation" repeatedly to describe his own version of liberal cognition, what he calls "manifest manners" or the many images of and stories told about Indigenous peoples that replace presence and survival with absence and cultural dominance. The word "manners" separates Indigenous aesthetics of survivance from a colonial aesthetics of liberal cognition by situating the latter in relation to the nonperformative, or the outward expression of recognition as social behavior without action. In other words, manifest manners might be read as a form of liberal cognition in which simulation replaces social action. The aesthetics of survivance, then, undermines liberal cognition through radical presence. Presence becomes a form of action. In this sense, all Indigenous stories undermine empty speech. Importantly though, Vizenor's aesthetics also calls for the kind of reading Tagaq's text makes available.

All Indigenous stories participate in an aesthetics of survivance, but, for Vizenor, this aesthetics is also inherently sounded. What he initially describes as "a singular

sense of presence" created by Native storiers is quickly clarified as an "*aural* sense of presence" (1; emphasis added). While he engages Indigenous writers and oral storytellers alike, he continually reverts to sound, using it as both a metaphor and a literary practice to establish an alternative to manifest manners. He writes, "Ancestral storiers hunted their words by sound, shadow, ecstatic conversation and by the uncertainties of creation and the seasons. The native literary artist creates the metaphors of sound in silence, the imagic scenes of totemic transmutation and natural reason" (7). Tagaq makes clear that these "metaphors of sound" are not just metaphoric. They are present as complex soundscapes that require a listening practice that engages an aesthetics of survivance rather than a reading practice that looks only for what is easily discernable. Sound works against a politics of recognition or knowability by establishing presence without interpretability in the seemingly silent pages of written texts. This aural presence is, as Vizenor says, "not a mere reaction" (86) and, as such, requires an aesthetic reciprocity that Glen Coulthard (Dene) identifies as part of "an 'actional' existence, as opposed to a 'reactional' one characterized by *ressentiment*" (44). Where "recognition in its contemporary liberal form promises to reproduce the very configurations of colonialist, racist, patriarchal state power that Indigenous peoples' demands for recognition have historically sought to transcend" (3), the indecipherability of Tagaq's soundscapes requires careful listening and mutual action. After all, as Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee) explains, "There are countless conversations taking place around us, in voices and languages of every imaginable form and frequency. Too often we don't hear them, and when we do we rarely understand them except perhaps in ceremony—or art" (87). Without easy understandability, soundscapes help translate experience through what Justice calls "imaginative empathy," an affect that is anything but empty, instead requiring action in relation with others.

It is not that speech is never actionable, but performative speech must be relational. As Justice puts it, "Story, song, poem, and prayer all serve to remind us of

Vol 10, No 1 (2024)
DOI: 10.22024/UniKent/03/tm.1194
Pp. 1-25
CC-BY 4.0
ISSN 2059-0911

our connections to one another, human and other-than-human alike" (87). Where speech is mitigated by "the derisive signifiers of manifest manners" (Vizenor 5), nonhuman soundscapes offer the possibility of a listening practice that accepts discomfort and invites action. *Split Tooth* rarely represents human speech, allowing the focus to shift from what might be emptied out by liberal cognition toward the actional possibilities in sound. Dylan Robinson (Stó:lō/Skwah), in his theorization of the nonperformative and "hungry listening" as liberal and colonial practices, situates listening and speech in relation to state practices of reconciliation like the 2008 apology to residential school survivors in Canada.[1] Apologies and other calls for reconciliation have, for Robinson, "increasingly emphasized the necessity for settlers and Indigenous people to come together in dialogue as a form that is understood *in and of itself* as reconciliation;" yet, "such practices of social change elide the primary and substantive actions of restitution and redress" (17). Speech is action in this framework. For both Tagaq and Robinson, though, such "action" does not create equitable relations; it only imitates them, indicating the *feeling* of change without actual change. Rejecting this affective atmosphere, Tagaq instead engages dissonance, rage, howls, screeches, and what one reviewer calls "palpitating beats" in her most recent album, *Tongues* (2022; *bandcamp*). Sound, for her, is affective, but it rejects the listener's attempts to reconcile the literal and figurative dissonances of the music and of the experiences it deploys.

*Tongues*, like Tagaq's other work, is situated in relation to the discourse of reconciliation, but it is not simply a response to it. Released in conjunction with the discovery in Canada of the graves of hundreds of children near the sites of residential schools, it offers its own irreconcilable affect as a way of being in relation to such trauma, both historical and contemporary. As she said in an interview with *bandcamp*, "The reality is, I'm on stage, and I'm showing you what it feels like to be an indigenous

woman and it's not easy." As an experimentation with electronic noise, *Tongues* does not evoke ease; it is improvisational and chaotic. The pulsating beat of the opening song, "In Me," vibrates against synthesized sounds I am unable to identify—the buzzing scrape of what could be fingernails on textured plastic a synthesized lead-in to a sonically harsh invitation to "Eat your morals" (*Tongues*). Brief silences emerge as the repeated rhythm becomes louder and faster. Form mirrors content in this visceral calling out of the very act of listening or reading as consumption. The layering of manipulated breath and voice with electronic sound create an embodied affective experience, an action that is ontological, part of life as it is lived every day. Sound is an alternative to liberal speech, or the feeling of change, because it is embodied and invites listening without closure. In other words, it is not a response to singular events that can be felt and then dismissed as resolved; it is a way of living in the world in relation to ongoing processes of colonization.

As more than response, the dissonance and formal ambiguity of Tagaq's work, both written and performed, rejects what Robinson calls "hungry listening," which "privileges a recognition of palatable narratives of difference [and] takes part in content-locating practices that orient the ear toward identifying standardized features and type" (50). Such standardized content is hard to find in any of the music on *Tongues* and only becomes recognizable in brief moments that are quickly overlaid by discomfort. Those who listen hungrily for a difference that can be assimilated into the settler experience of assumed belonging enter into the music as strangers, and they will not be offered the closure of inclusion. Listening in this way is a start, but, for Tagaq, it cannot be a substitute for action; it is only a response, an attempt to "move beyond" the negative affect of colonialism through felt reconciliation without political action. New ways of listening are needed.

As a way of being and an invitation to listen differently, sound repairs—not through the feeling of change but through confrontation with what goes unheard. The death and burial of hundreds of children under the residential school system was not

Transmotion
Vol 10, No 1 (2024)
DOI: 10.22024/UniKent/03/tm.1194
Pp. 1-25
CC-BY 4.0
ISSN 2059-0911

a bounded event to which *Tongues* responds. It is part of the ongoing lived experience of colonial violence that cannot be relegated to an already settled past. Tagaq enters into conversation with these structures, refusing apology and inviting not only acknowledgement of past wrong but also action against ongoing violence. She allows for the possibility that even her settler audience might be moved by her music, but, for her, shame is not enough: "I do not need to console you afterwards because it hurts you or moves you to witness. If you were moved so strongly, then you do something about systemic racism when you go home. Don't come to me and apologize" (Tagaq, *bandcamp*). She values the structures of desire, the move to witness, in this response, but action takes the place of speech, or particularly the empty speech of shame. As she chants in the title song of *Tongues*, "I don't want your shame/It doesn't belong to me/You can't have my tongue." The appropriation of the tongue, the need to be absolved through apology, is nonperformative. It imitates action within an affective atmosphere of shame and absolution. Tagaq's work, instead, calls for a localized doing, or way of living in relation that listens for the unpalatable, the modes of experience that are not readily available.

By aligning the palatable and the nonperformative, Robinson and Tagaq show that reconciliation politics is a form of liberal cognition, and the individual's expression of shame is part of the governmental speech acts that seek to replace systemic change with feeling. The 2008 apology for residential schools and the audience members' expressions of shame attempt to refigure the discomfort of confronting experiences that are unfamiliar or cannot be represented fully by familiar forms as forgiveness, or at least recognition. Their ability to create the perception of shared affect in order to elide the unequal conditions through which they (we) maintain power lies in the transformation of social change into empty speech "acts" that mimic that change without enacting it. The continuation of settler power and comfort, then, relies on

reconciliation to make palatable colonial violence and dispossession.

## Empty Speech, Liberal Cognition

*Tongues* and *Split Tooth* each contend with a contemporary politics of reconciliation that responds to already enacted colonial power structures, but Tagaq's work also recognizes the ways in which colonial expansion has always been liberal. Each text comes into conversation, intrinsically or extrinsically, with not only the ongoing structures of feeling that emerge as graves are discovered and new violences committed toward the "Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls" to whom *Split Tooth* is dedicated but also the burials and violences themselves. "Tongues" might end with the denial of settler appropriation of the tongue, but it begins with, "They took our tongues" (Tagaq, *Tongues*). The denial of both Indigenous and settler agency in the process of colonial dispossession—the taking of the tongue—is placed in the past, almost as if complete and without material and affective consequences in the present. The past tense might imply that reconciliation is not the same as the taking of the tongue since it is happening in the present, but Tagaq then qualifies, "They *tried* to take our tongues" (emphasis added). The attempt was not complete; it is part of the ongoing processes that include reconciliation. The taking of the tongue accompanies both the violence of killing children in residential schools and the apology that came over a hundred years later. In other words, reconciliation is not only a response, an attempt to make right; it is a necessary structure of feeling that makes colonialism possible in the first place.

Even in the nineteenth century, as the British Empire rose to its fullest force, liberal cognition was intrinsically tied to imperial expansion. In an earlier work on liberal thought and empire, Uday Singh Mehta writes,

> To contain those differences [encountered in the colonies] or to mediate them through a prior settlement that fixes on reason, freedom, ethics, internationalism, multiculturalism, the universality of rights, or even democracy,

Transmotion
Vol 10, No 1 (2024)
DOI: 10.22024/UniKent/03/tm.1194
Pp. 1-25
CC-BY 4.0
ISSN 2059-0911

> is to deny 'the occult,' 'the parochial,' 'the traditional,' in short the unfamiliar, the very possibility of articulating the meaning and agentiality of its own experiences. (23)

The denial of agency to the unfamiliar echoes Tagaq's lyrics. The settler, in order to contend with difference and its violent assimilation into colonial governance, must deny their own agency, and that of the colonized, through the expression of sympathy with or recognition of the universality of human affective experience. This kind of cognition invests in nonperformative speech, espousing ideals like democracy and freedom even though, as Hadley points out, it sought to "slow the country's [in this case, England's] progress toward democracy" by replacing social action with opinion, or speech. Precisely because they employ a politics and philosophy invested in the recognition of individual thought as a way to delimit the social parameters of politics, projects like reconciliation in Canada and the United States perform decolonization while perpetuating colonial governance through speech.

Tagaq explores a possible corrective to this history of empty speech in sound. Her soundscapes reimpose indecipherability to prompt a form of listening that contends with complexity as possibility. This kind of listening deploys kinship as what Kim TallBear (Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate) terms "being in good relation" (25). She contrasts kinship, or "caretaking relations," with the American dream, which deploys desire for an ideal state toward the elimination of Indigenous peoples from the land on which that state relies (24). Once again identifying empty speech as intrinsic to settler colonialism in both past and present, Tallbear writes, "Indigenous genocide is the genesis of settler states. Yet it is incomplete. Indigenous people must be de-animated if the appropriations are to continue and if settler states are to maintain dominion" (29). The settler state and reconciliation politics, in this framework, can only find possibility in the homogeneous, the dream of a better future that negates change in the present.[2]

This dream is a nonperformative. It speaks without listening, de-animating Indigenous practices and peoplehood through nonperformative "acts" of sympathy or recognition transforming individual responsibility in the relationship into a (liberal) cognitive exercise, rather than a practice of what Robinson calls "listening-in-relation" (51). The expressed affect is enough to assuage the guilt of the settler and, as such, the perceived need for change disappears as well.

Tagaq's ways of listening, on the other hand, are an engagement with the indecipherable, an alternative aesthetics grounded in the kind of kinship that is constantly negotiated within relations of responsibility and care—in other words, listening that happens in relation to others. By listening-in-relation, we listen as respectful guests and enter into relation with other knowledge systems without seeking to extract them or apply our own (Robinson 51). Affective forms are needed to reopen the possibility for action by conducting thought through aesthetic traces of that which is present though not readily available. The text can no longer be seen as, itself, action; it must invite action in the traces it leaves. Tagaq's soundscapes, in this sense, invite complexity through attention to forms of being in relation that are not readily available but, nonetheless, structure possibilities for change.

It is through the chaotic soundscapes of *Tongues* that Tagaq demonstrates the kind of listening that might be possible in *Split Tooth*. Four of the songs on *Tongues* take their lyrics from the novel, overlaying the act of reading with the act of listening. The opening track, and one of the last poems in *Split Tooth*, "In Me," transposes throat singing and synthetic echoes of electronic sound and vocalizations to emphasize each syllable, turning even the abstractness of "morals" into onomatopoeia. Much more than a reading of written text, the repetition of the opening line "Eat your morals" slowly shifts into a throat-sung growl of consumptive desire (*Split Tooth*, 178/*Tongues*). Eating is enacted, heard, more than the abstractness of language, a trace of a possibly unfamiliar soundscape. For Tagaq, the text contains these sounds, but they must be listened for. Listening itself becomes an unfamiliar action. Rather than construct a

Transmotion
Vol 10, No 1 (2024)
DOI: 10.22024/UniKent/03/tm.1194
Pp. 1-25
CC-BY 4.0
ISSN 2059-0911

feeling of change through palatable narratives of shame and redemption or reconciliation, a listening that is not hungry seeks to restructure relations, to act rather than speak. The consumption that is both expressed through language and heard in Tagaq's soundscapes is not simply a rejection of settler morality through a command to eat the apology that cannot sustain Tagaq; it is also the action of eating, internalizing the morality that is externalized through speech. As Tagaq continues, "I am in you/then/You are in me/You are now me" (178/*Tongues*). The relation—between colonizer and colonized, person and shame, government and speech—becomes embodied, intertwined through shared frameworks of action and change that are more than felt. Experiences that are not readily available remain unpalatable, unconsumable, but listening makes possible relations across experiences without assimilation. Kinship is given primacy, taking the absence of shared experience as a given.

This aesthetics of absence structures *Split Tooth* as a palimpsest, which bars the reader from certainty in the relationship and, as such, invites active and affective engagement with layers of experience and agency that may be indiscernible. Robinson attends to the palimpsest as a "more-than-representational frame," an affective embodiment of form that occurs in the act of listening (45). Without representation, absence "prompts an ethics of listening that somewhat paradoxically seeks to hear the indiscernible and the absent" (59). Listening, however fragmented, happens in the experience of form, an aesthetic relationship to the silences that reveal what may not be present audibly. Rather than construct a world through description and storytelling, sound as affective form evokes an incomplete experience of the world narrated, prompting the reader to listen without the need for understanding. Soundscapes do not construct a knowable world, one both controlled and contained, but invite an affective relationship with sound worlds that are felt rather than known. Immersed in unknowable sound, listening becomes action—not the kind of action that

is ultimately passive, a speaking for, but action in the form of building relations and developing alternatives to colonial systems of thought.

In *Split Tooth*, sound is an invitation to act in relation, to listen. The soundscape is absent from the representational space of the text, yet it is constantly present as that which is indecipherable and experiential for the narrator. The structure of the narrative—which defies easy generic categorization through the interweaving of poetry and prose, storytelling and description—develops as an alternative form of knowing in relation to that which is unknown. Unlike dialogue and other oral forms made present in writing, the palimpsestic layering of sounds in *Split Tooth* that may include, but are not defined by, human speech invites a felt relationality. Sound is made present without being expressed as form, producing an affective aesthetic through which sound becomes action and silence requires careful listening. Attention to affect in the experience of form, alongside the meaning found in the content of a narrative, allows for a different kind of reading, one grounded in relational listening practices and not the consumption of static meaning. Speech is transformed from an action in itself that is then passively experienced or appreciated to one part in an emergent soundscape that invites ongoing and active listening. Through its visceral language, and with limited dialogue or other expressions of speech, *Split Tooth* rejects an aesthetics of passive speech to deploy listening as relational action.

**Landscapes and Sound Worlds**

Sound pervades the icy worlds through which Tagaq's narrator moves. The narrator lives in an unspecified town in Nunavut, the northernmost territory of Canada, and everything beyond the town is a seemingly endless expanse of white, "the sea ice" (Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 54). This environment is anything but empty: The narrator hears polar bears sing, and even light evokes sound as an absence in the text that makes listening in specific relationships possible. But, these landscapes remain indistinct in their alterity. The increasingly sparse descriptions of both town and tundra that do little

Transmotion
Vol 10, No 1 (2024)
DOI: 10.22024/UniKent/03/tm.1194
Pp. 1-25
CC-BY 4.0
ISSN 2059-0911

to distinguish one piece of ice from another construct an almost homogeneous, singular image of a presumably diverse landscape. The buildings of the small town of 12,000 human souls become the only visible contrast in an environment that, though never described as uniform, is visually indistinct, a "treeless expanse [that] lends itself to illusion" (25). Even those areas that are described, or at least named, apart from the town or the ice are brought into the space of the town by the objects scattered across them. At a "smallish pond" where a boy almost drowns, "[t]here are blue Styrofoam pieces lying around, wind-blown from construction sites from the last building season" (7), and "[t]he bog is littered with pieces of plywood blown by the fierce Arctic wind from various construction sites" (18). At Nine Mile Lake, quite distant from the town, the narrator does describe a number of distinct features like seagulls' nests and small pools of baby trout, but even this lively space contains bits of plywood, as well as the chip bags they drop on their way. Distinction in the visual landscape comes with the town and, moreover, with the few summer months.

The summer is when most action becomes possible: "The freeze traps life and stops time. The thaw releases it" (Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 6). Construction crews must work 24 hours a day, and children "run the dusty streets looking for adventure" (7). Description, the representation of the visual landscape in human language, and action come together to paint a picture of human life and activity that seems to happen almost on its own. It is contained by the easier summer months and by childhood, specifically the childhood of the narrator. The poems that intersperse these descriptions introduce sexual violence and fear, yet there remains an optimism to the stories about playing on the lake with friends or experiencing relationality with a newt who stays warm inside the narrator's mouth. Even the soundscapes of the summer are identifiable. There are no singing polar bears in this landscape, but there is country music and kids "running and screeching with joy" (29). Not all of these sounds are happy ones, but they are

recognizable, distinctly human and tied to the town, just like the plywood and chip bags littering the thawing waters of the bogs and lakes. As sirens sound and laughter rings out, the narrator reflects, "we are simply an expression of the energy of the sun" (12). The knowable, the human, is found in the summer, a manifestation of sunlight. Sound mixes into a visible landscape. It is there, but it does not require careful listening—not until winter sets in.

Unlike the more detailed summer landscapes, the tundra in winter is still part of the experience narrated but it is visually nondescript. The distinctive landscapes of the summer months are transformed into complex soundscapes. Sound is very present in the early scenes, but it is part of the detailed descriptions that do not invite the same kind of affective engagement. It is already knowable, describable, palatable. The settler reader can read, and perhaps listen, hungrily for those welcome tropes of children thriving and express sympathy for scenes of violence that are painful but, nonetheless, all too familiar. Here the familiar is also the visible; the sounds we can hear align with what we can see, what is described by the narrator. As Robinson notes, "One […] way that settler positionality guides perception is by generating normative narratocracies of experience, feeling, and the sensible" (39). He calls this process "the action of 'settling' perception," one that disallows us from hearing what is not already considered normative, what is not visible (40). The describable realism of the narrator's childhood experiences can be read through settled perception, constructing a palatable narrative that, while far from erasing Indigenous presence, does some work to negate difference and make more active forms of listening unnecessary. The landscape is representable and, as such, recognizable or seemingly knowable. The soundscapes of winter are not.

The more limited description of the ice in winter constructs a landscape that is unknowable in its irrepresentability. It reveals the complexity of even the town's soundscapes; what appeared palatable begins to break apart, sending the narrator out onto the ice, where the polar bears sing. Winter begins, in *Split Tooth*, with the violence

Transmotion
Vol 10, No 1 (2024)
DOI: 10.22024/UniKent/03/tm.1194
Pp. 1-25
CC-BY 4.0
ISSN 2059-0911

of cold: "Wind sings but carries an axe instead of a note" (Tagaq 36). The soundscape has changed. The wind might be the same, the path from her house to the school the same, but its song is no longer an invitation to familiarity. It will reveal itself to be, instead, an invitation to listen. Even the people have become unfamiliar. They are hungry. Instead of laughter, the air echoes with lonely footsteps in the snow, the only human sound left outside the houses where country music blares. The music, like the cold, is dangerous. The people inside the houses listen hungrily, ready to consume the energy that numbs fear and shame. As the narrator consumes the butane she uses to enter "this world where nothing exists" (42), familiar faces consume her body, entering her room as the music swells through the momentarily open door. People she knows become "an unnamed man […] a shape, a shadow" (46), and listening becomes impossible, unimaginable, as the soundscape shifts to subtle but violent "squeaking springs and mewling sounds" (47). The next time the narrator hears the music, she will not go home, choosing the violence of winter over the hunger of those consumed by shame.

Fear is inherent to these winter landscapes for Tagaq. As difficult as the scenes of rape and violence are, they are not scenes of blame. Hunger comes from the residential schools that "have beaten the Inuktitut out of this town in the name of progress, in the name of decency" (Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 50). It is a product of guilt and shame, anxiety and fear. For the narrator, "outward faces and words are usually so different from their true selves and vulnerabilities that people like to hide" (51). It is these vulnerabilities that create the faceless, the unfamiliar. They are also, then, an invitation to listen-in-relation. There is no escape from fear in the "immensity of the Arctic Ocean" (54), but there is an opportunity "to force action, to change what caused the anxiety." It is an opportunity tied directly to listening: "We never like to listen to ourselves, even when we know we have to. We plod on ignoring what we must be,

what we are meant to be. We are taught to fear our instincts. We must hunt down and fall in love with Fear, therefore defeating our self-doubt every day. This is followed by joy" (51). In fear is an invitation to listen, to live in relation with the unknowable, to force action. The country music serves to cover up the unknowable soundscapes of a whited-out landscape. It also calls the narrator onto the ice, where "sound is its own currency" (55).

By defying description in the text, the winter landscapes are revealed to be complex in the diverse and extensive sound worlds that both make visible the false optimism of the summer months and foster affective relationships through the invitation to listen. Unlike hungry listening, which seeks the recognizable and the absolution of shame, the listening solicited by affective forms like Tagaq's soundscapes is a listening-in-relation with the indecipherable. Robinson writes, "we must paradoxically engage a listening that does not reduce what is heard [or felt] to the knowable, that resists a multicultural categorization of one cultural sound among many, that understands sounds in its irreducible alterity, and that moves beyond our recognition of normative […] protocols. Such listening would understand that not all sound can be translated to equivalent analogies" (64). This kind of listening happens in the face of absence, the trace of what may be inaudible even in its presence. The visceral language that reveals the presence of sound does so as a palimpsest of that which cannot be translated. The layers of sound are present as traces, but they are not represented or described. They are an idea, part of a complex soundscape in which relationships with the indecipherable become possible, even necessary.

During the whiteout, when the narrator listens-in-relation with the polar bears, the landscape becomes unknowable—whited out. Amidst this alterity, there is no description of the sounds the polar bears are making, only the idea of sound. The sun talks, the water calls, but "It's an indecipherable language" (Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 93). It cannot be represented on silent pages, but it is also irrevocably present. Earlier, in her first encounter with the Northern Lights, the narrator lies on the ice and thinks of the

Transmotion
Vol 10, No 1 (2024)
DOI: 10.22024/UniKent/03/tm.1194
Pp. 1-25
CC-BY 4.0
ISSN 2059-0911

legend that "says that if you whistle or scream at them, they will come down and cut off your head" (55). Sound is emphasized, taking primacy over the visual brilliancy of the lights. Ocean, ice, and sky come together in the addition of sound to the landscape, the scream that brings the light to the land. What little description there is evokes sound; even the Lights, a visual experience, are described as "roaring green thunder," not lightning, weaving the traces of sounds that cannot be heard into the landscape. The song she then sings to the Lights becomes a part of that soundscape but an ephemeral one. Like the indecipherable language of the polar bears, the song is only an idea of sound, a nondescript possibility of relationality. The narrator thinks, "Maybe some sound will coax the Northern Lights out of the sky? Sound can only help beckon them" (55). Between the screams of the legend and the song she hums, the sound can be anything and cannot be translated into the kind of descriptive language that might allow the reader to share the experience. It remains unheard on the ice, engaging a kind of listening-in-relation.

The emphasis on sound in text belies any attempt to read for an easily recognizable world; instead, the reader must listen in relation to the knowledge systems in which the text is located, ones in which protocols are established by the Lights and the ice and must be followed as an act of both respect and survival. The lights offer what Robinson calls a "form of attentiveness" that the narrator must then put into conversation with her own forms to enter into a relationship with the unknowable otherness of the Lights. There is no knowing the Lights in themselves, only a relationship that emerges in an active listening for what we cannot hear. Access to experience in the text is given through affect: the bite of the cold, the vibrations of sound in the throat, the feeling of thunder.

The narrator joins with the Northern Lights by leaving the soundscape of the town and entering into that of the tundra. As she sings, she meditates at length on the

power of sound as affect, an invitation to listen:

> Sound is a conduit to a realm we cannot totally comprehend. The power of sound conducts our thoughts into emotions that then manifest in action.
>
> Sound can heal.
>
> Sound can kill.
>
> Sound is malleable. Sound can be a spear or a needle. Sound can create the sound then stitch it. Sound can cauterize and materialize. No one can hear my song but the Northern Lights. (Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 55-56)

Only she and the Northern Lights can hear the sounds themselves. Descriptions of sound are replaced with the visceral—the wound from a spear, the prick of a needle, the weaving of thread into skin or the flame that seals the wound. Listening happens in the wake of feeling conducted by sound. Sound becomes affect, and action manifests when sound, or its trace, is conducted, when it is listened to or for. Sound, including speech, becomes performative, the opposite of Ahmed's nonperformative, in the relationship—the act of listening-in-relation.

These affective forms, visceral yet lacking the kind of detail or mimesis that makes them recognizable, are an invitation to listen, in Robinson's sense of the term. The silence in which sound might coax the Lights from the sky requires careful listening and attention to the text as palimpsest, a carrier of unrepresentable sound. Only in the experience of affect, when no speech is present to replace action, can listening become action, an active entering into relation with the unknowable. The tundra landscape becomes distinguishable from the town as a layered sound world, a space for change. The town is its own sound world, but one limited by its seeming knowability. Where the tundra invites complex relationality through the act of listening, the laughter and loud music at home promote listening as a form of protection. It is a toxic sound world, one in which "[t]he thumping is metronomic but the screeches and whoops of the listeners are chaotic. […] Going home is never a good idea under these circumstances" (Tagaq, *Split Tooth* 54). In either environment, listening is an *act* of

Transmotion
Vol 10, No 1 (2024)
DOI: 10.22024/UniKent/03/tm.1194
Pp. 1-25
CC-BY 4.0
ISSN 2059-0911

engagement through which different actions are made possible. The idea of sound, the evocation of that which is present but without representation, is made available as affective form, which requires careful listening.

**Sound and the Nonperformative**

Sound that invites listening through its traces in affective forms provides an alternative to colonizing forms that promote speech as action. In the less visceral, more descriptive early scenes of the narrator's childhood in summer, the detailed realism performs a kind of optimism. The seeming effectiveness of language in representing the landscape, as well as the experiences of the narrator, occludes the kind of listening invited by the soundscapes of winter. Words, spoken or written, do not manifest in action in the way that sounds that "conduct our thoughts into emotions" do. Lauren Berlant draws a connection between realist, descriptive forms and an affective involvement in fantasies of the "good life" (1). She might identify the optimism of the representable summer landscape as a cruel one: On the surface, it imagines the availability of liberal fantasies that locate agency in representation. While there is little or no sense that the narrator imagines any particular change for her community, the formal reliance on description, the ability to make decipherable, enters into a history of liberal nonperformativity by inscribing possibility in the ability to speak, or in this case to narrate, the world. Yet, it is quickly made clear that speech cannot be considered indistinguishable from action. Liberal, colonizing forms that rely on Robinson's hungry listening for recognizable narratives fail to engage in the affective possibilities of listening as relational action.

While the summer landscapes are much more visually distinct than the winter ones, they are nonetheless present in the text at what Berlant considers the impasse of cruel optimism. She defines the impasse as "a stretch of time in which one moves

around with a sense that the world is intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance that […] coordinate the standard melodramatic crises with those processes that have not yet found their genre of event" (Berlant 4). The impasse occurs, formally, in the absence of that which can be represented. As seen in the soundscapes that invite listening, much of the narrator's world is both "present and enigmatic," sometimes familiar yet without a definable genre. Tagaq's text is aesthetically ambiguous, neither a novel nor a poetry collection. The more novel-like sections are interwoven with poems that do a different kind of affective work. The descriptions of landscape and adventure are framed in relation to scenes of fear, indifference, and violence. Like sound, these scenes cannot be represented effectively in the more descriptive formal spaces of the text. They take form at the impasse between the familiar and "those processes that have not yet found their genre of event." While these impasses are often painful, they also introduce an alternative to speech as action. The unrepresentable requires listening-in-relation to open up space for healing and future action. Speech alone does not serve as agency, while listening acts in relation.

Berlant refers to that which is without genre as a "process." Rather than a containable, recognizable action or speech that takes the place of action, the relationship that occurs in the act of listening, even when what is heard cannot be translated or understood, is ongoing action. It is a way of taking responsibility. Sophie Mayer, in an essay on Indigenous modes of poetics, describes affective forms in terms of "a particular, recurring invocational figure whereby the poem invites the world and the world opens to the poem" (235). While she is referring to an actual figure in a performance, a figurative understanding of invocation in form recognizes the ways in which listening is a recurring act. It responds to absence as a trace that may not be reducible to understanding and, yet, is irrevocably present. The narrative opens itself to the world as an invitation to a relationship. The soundscapes of Tagaq's text do what speech cannot. They reveal their own absence in the affective forms that serve as

*Transmotion*
Vol 10, No 1 (2024)
DOI: 10.22024/UniKent/03/tm.1194
Pp. 1-25
CC-BY 4.0
ISSN 2059-0911

palimpsests. They cannot be mistaken as action because it is only in the reciprocal act of listening that action becomes possible.

The impasse of liberal fantasies of representation and the indecipherable requires alternative forms that both respond to the liberal, settler ideologies that underpin ongoing colonization and invite possibilities for relationality. The affective forms of *Split Tooth*, which comprise little description or human speech, make traces of the unrepresentable present to structure engagement in terms of emotion that manifests as action. Sound is transformed from that which can be heard and understood into an invitation to listen as relational action. Returning home from her time on the ice singing with the Northern Lights—"Ice in lung, Ice on chest, Ice in heart"—the narrator is asked where she has been. In one of the few instances of speech in the narrative, she replies, "Out walking," and immediately retreats to be alone (Tagaq 57). Speech is emptied of its ability to manifest as action. It takes the place of the relationship, standing in for any affective engagement. This ending to an intense and deeply felt encounter leaves something wanting. The Northern Lights are still in her head, but the moment of speech takes only a second of her attention and ends in further detachment from others. Speech becomes passive, while action becomes possible in the traces of sound that invite us to listen.

---

*Notes*

[1] The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established in Canada as part of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement to collect testimonies from the survivors of Indian Residential Schools and establish a plan of action to address the government's role in this more-than-120-year history of forced removal and assimilationist policy. Residential schools operated in Canada into the 1990s and continue to affect those who attended the schools and their families. Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued a public apology on June 11, 2008, before the work of the TRC began. The US has not yet done even this much to address its own residential school history.

[2] Lauren Berlant makes a similar argument in *Cruel Optimism*, with the American dream in this case being a sort of optimism that keeps dreamers tied to the cruel inequalities that de-animate in the present.

**Works Cited**

Ahmed, Sara. "The Nonperformativity of Antiracism." *Meridians* 7.1 (2006): 104-126. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40338719

Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.

Coulthard, Glen Sean. *Red Skin White Masks: Rejecting the colonial Politics of Recognition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

Hadley, Elaine. *Living Liberalism: Practical Citizenship in Mid-Victorian Britain*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

Justice, Daniel Heath. *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018.

Martineau, Jarrett and Eric Ritskes. "Fugitive Indigeneity: Reclaiming the Terrain of Decolonial Struggle through Indigenous Art." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3.1 (2014): I-XII.

Mayer, Sophie. "'Our Leaves of Paper Will Be/Dancing Lightly': Indigenous Poetics." *The Oxford Handbook of Indigenous American Literature*, ed. James H. Cox and Daniel Heath Justice. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014: 234-249.

Mehta, Uday Singh. *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

Robinson, Dylan. *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020.

Tagaq, Tanya. *Split Tooth*. New York: Penguin, 2018.

---. "Tanya Tagaq Speaks Truth on 'Tongues.'" *Bandcamp Daily, Features*. By Max Pilley. *bandcamp*, 25 Jan. 2022. https://daily.bandcamp.com/features/tanya-tagaq-tongues-interview

Transmotion
Vol 10, No 1 (2024)
DOI: 10.22024/UniKent/03/tm.1194
Pp. 1-25
CC-BY 4.0
ISSN 2059-0911

---. *Tongues*. 2022. Six Shooter.

TallBear, Kim. "Caretaking Relations, Not American Dreaming." *Kalfou* 6.1 (2019): 24-41. https://doi.org/10.15367/kf.v6i1.228

Vizenor, Gerald. *Native Liberty: Natural Reason and Cultural Survivance*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009.