

# The Sonic Ecologies of Anticolonial Writing

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In *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett brings our attention to ‘the vitality of matter and the lively power of material formations...’.<sup>[1]</sup> Moving away from anthropocentric theories of subjectivity and historical materiality, Bennett highlights ‘the material agency or effectivity’ of non-human phenomena and writes against the forces of ecological destruction determined by human approaches to matter as inanimate.<sup>[2]</sup> Bennett studies stem cells, electricity, trash and metals, undoing binaries such as life/matter, human/animal, organic/inorganic so as ‘to induce in human bodies an aesthetic-affective openness to material vitality’.<sup>[3]</sup> She turns her attention to how non-human bodies are affective catalysts, where materiality is equated with affect, or in her words, ‘impersonal affect’ because ‘they cannot be imagined (even ideally) as persons.’ Bennett emphasises that her political and philosophical project is not a ‘spiritual supplement or “life force” added to the matter said to house it,’<sup>[4]</sup> instead by moving away from humanist traditions of vitalism, Bennett aims to detach understandings of matter as ‘raw material for the creative activity of humans...’.<sup>[5]</sup>

Building on Bennett’s prescient argument, this essay bears witness to the vibrant matter of sound. More specifically, I attend to the ways that ‘an aesthetic-affective openness’ to the material vitality of sound is expressed and recorded through practices of writing, particularly poetic writing. Crucially, in the examples that follow, the vitality intrinsic to the materiality of sound is inseparable from the material vibrancy of writing. I seek to hear how certain anticolonial poets attend to the materiality of language via an attunement with the sounds of history and ecology.

Approaching examples of anticolonial poetry as ‘material formations’ and performances of affect through a Spinozist lens that understands that all bodies and things have the capacity for activity and responsiveness, I deeply listen to, and acknowledge, how the writing of sound is an exercise inseparable from the listening and writing body’s placement, within a sonorous environment. More than just a fixed placing or positionality however, the sounding and writing poetic voice is approached in this essay as movement. In other words, I see the writing body as moving within a choreographic entanglement and conversation with the sounds, rhythms, and tempos of organic and inorganic life forms, objects, structures, and ecologies.

Furthermore, I attend to how the poetic unleashing of sound *as* matter is a political, social and aesthetic imperative for anticolonial artists, writers and thinkers. It is not incidental, considering the histories of Western conquest (and their justification as inextricably linked to epistemological criteria that divided the world into dualities such as nature/culture, human/animal, primitive/modern) that numerous anticolonial poets and writers invent language by attending to the sounds of non-human animations. Their work foreshadows and echoes Bennett’s project, having for centuries already experienced the violence of ecological and cultural destruction unleashed

from a world view that would deny the vibrancy and vitality of matter, and their own mattering. These poetics, however, are not merely oppositional to colonial tenets and grammars, but rather experiments imbued with an aesthetic-affective openness to more-than-human agencies, performances and vitalities manifested as the sonic, poetic and material effects of emergent properties and their assemblages.

This text is also an experiment at assemblage, materialised by way of a 'discrepant engagement' between the sonic and textual matter of anticolonial writers from two different postcolonial spaces, the Caribbean and the Indonesian archipelagos. I follow Nathaniel Mackey's method in *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing* that attends to the problems of canonisation, axiomatic exclusions and monolithic understandings of identity. Mackey engages in a method of creative kinship by bringing together writers and musicians in a conversation across disciplines, fields and geographical divides, calls for a questioning of convention, and hears these works as refractory, insubordinate and oppositional 'rumblings'.<sup>[6]</sup> Following Mackey, I analyse the ways in which a searching for an anticolonial language and poetics is a common quest shared across differing archipelagic postcolonial geographies, and how there is also a common turning to the noise of more-than-human environments and relationalities for the articulation of what Édouard Glissant calls a 'counter-poetics'.<sup>[7]</sup>

What do these poetics counter exactly? It is important here to point to the relationship between colonialism and modernity, as manifested in the colonial and postcolonial practices of archiving sonic matters through the performance of writing sound. Ana María Ochoa Gautier studies how colonial and modern epistemological divisions between

nature (the given) and culture (the made) are bound up with questions of 'aurality' and writing as a technology of recording. Studying how 'the role of listening to different sounds considered "voices" shaped notions of nature and culture central to understandings of personhood and alterity in Latin America,' Ochoa Gautier analyses nineteenth-century colonial archives of 'listening practices' in Columbia disseminated by way of 'legible aural inscription'.<sup>[8]</sup> In other words, within these archives, personhood was ascribed to individuals or groups of individuals who performed the role of sound properly, through 'correct' listening, speaking, singing practices and vocalisations.

For Ochoa Gautier, the archive of listening practices reveals the 'ontologies and epistemologies of the acoustic, particularly the voice, produced and enmeshed in audible techniques...'<sup>[9]</sup> and how the inscriptions and categorisations of sounds within this colonial archive reveals a 'historical mode of audibility' in which the voice and vocality are politically regimented by prescribed forms of aurality.<sup>[10]</sup> The author also reveals the important role the archiving of sound, language and expressive cultures plays in orthographically defining and containing heterogeneous populations transitioning from colonial subjugation to postcolonial governance. Here national identity and the delineation of citizenship is inseparable from what was labelled as the proper sounds and expressions of national consciousness, subjectivity and modernity. Ochoa Gautier troubles the sanctioned archives of colonial and postcolonial administrations by attending to the contested sites of different acoustic practices and listening to the leaking sonic matters it seeks to inscribe.

For instance, in studying the ways European ethnomusicological methods were developed during colonial expeditions such as the one described below, Ochoa Gautier brings our

attention to the ways in which the sounds of the *bogas* (boat rowers of the Magdalena River in Columbia) for instance were received and subsequently archived by colonial audile techniques:

Let us recall that the global colonial archive is full of peoples who howl like animals and the *bogas*' mode of vocalization was described by travelers again and again as a mode of howling comparable to the voices of different animals. Such howls were used to understand the boundary or relation between the human and the nonhuman by Western travelers in one way, and by the *bogas* and other riverine peoples from the Caribbean, in another. For Creoles and Europeans, sounding like animals was the sign of a lowly human condition, used for processes of racialization through a politics of representation. For others, such as the *bogas* or indigenous peoples in northern South America, the voice was not understood as that which represented their identity. Instead, the voice manifested or enabled the capacity to move between states of multiplicity or unity where a single person can envoice multiple beings and where collective singing, as in a feast, can manifest a unity in which the collective is understood as expressing the singular, where different living entities or musical instruments voice the breath of life and where culture is understood 'as an ongoing act of creation' rather than 'the distillation of a set of abstract ideals'.<sup>[11]</sup>

I quote the above excerpt at length because of the striking resonances between Ochoa Gautier's argument and Bennett's explorations of materiality's vibrancies across human and

non-human assemblages as 'ongoing acts of creation' that elide identity and representation. For both, voicings of 'the breath of life' emerge through a correlation of living entities, instruments and multiplicities. It is also clear that the audile techniques of colonial archivists must ignore the materiality of sound in order to rationalise 'human' expression. Thus, a counter-poetics, or a counter writing, recording and archiving is one that takes the matter of sound very seriously. The writing of and with sound is inextricable from questions of anticolonial political ecologies and environments. We can now turn to poetic techniques of inscription that manifest the vibrancy of sonic matter.

In *History of the Voice*, Kamau Brathwaite defines what he terms 'nation language' as 'the kind of English spoken by the people who were brought to the Caribbean, not the official English now, but the language of slaves and labourers, the servants who were brought in by the conquistadors.'.<sup>[12]</sup> For Brathwaite, this shift from submerged to emerging language generates a continuum between the creolised sounds of the Anglophone Caribbean made up of ancient Amerindian and numerous African and English sounds. He writes, 'It may be in English: but often it is in English which is like a howl, or a shout, or a machine-gun or the wind or a wave.'.<sup>[13]</sup> Brathwaite argues that the poetry produced out of the Caribbean must listen to the sounds and look at the sights of the very environment the people of the Caribbean are native to because 'the hurricane does not roar in pentameters'.<sup>[14]</sup>

A methodological breakout happens by tapping into an osmotic chorus between the body and its environment and the pressures that shape them into a tentative embrace. Brathwaite recounts how the poem *Calypso* made itself heard in the materialised rhythms of a skidding, blooming, skipping stone that *curved, hissed, flashed* and *fanged* on the waters off a beach in Barbados to

the humming a Calypsonian tune. These movements generated the naming of different Caribbean islands, inseparable from the sonic matter of the skipping stone and calypso music as well as the vibrant matter of *reef*, *wave*, *spray*, and *clay*.<sup>[15]</sup> For the poet, a breaking away from the Chaucerian rhythms of the iambic pentameter entails the question: ‘how do you get a rhythm which approximates the *natural* experience, the *environmental* experience?’<sup>[16]</sup> Interestingly, a tentative answer emerges in Brathwaite’s approach to a poetics of landscape through distinct variations of movement, and in the written ‘shapes of intonation’ and ‘intervallic pattern’.<sup>[17]</sup> Following the latter as method, I now turn to the question of environment, sound, and language in the postcolonial sphere of another archipelago, that of Indonesia.

The above poetic moment – generated from moving and singing with the living matter of landscape – echoes Indonesian novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s turn to the senses and nature as he searched for his ‘own Indonesian language’ while incarcerated by the Dutch on an island off the coast of Java in 1945:

How can we ever understand the language of the sea, pounding the beach and lovingly embracing it? And the chirping birds and the laughing lizards? If we don’t know our own language! Suddenly I get a sense of something – a longing for something better than all of this here... It only exists in guessing and groping.<sup>[18]</sup>

In a similar vein to Brathwaite, who writes against the grain of European linguistic standards that have been imposed onto a Caribbean space, Pramoedya speaks to how the Indonesian language he is searching for cannot be the one offered to him by either the language’s colonial history or the fledging

postcolonial nation-state’s dictations, but rather one emerging from the vital animations and materialities of the non-human environment *as* human language. Several decades later Indonesian poet Remy Sylado also turns to the vibrant matter of sound in order to materialise poetic inscription.

In the poem *Sound (Bunyi)* we hear and read the repeated non-sensical signs of *tiki*, *ziki* and *niki* as they fall diagonally across the page as shapes of intonation, sounds that allude to the pattern of rain falling on a tin roof (*tiki*), the rhythmic sound of sex on an iron bed (*ziki*) under the tin roof, and the reverberation of these assemblages of material sounds as repeated echo (*niki*). The howl, wind and waves of sounded words, the rhythms and syncopations, those patterns and intonations, reaped from the material formations of skimming stones and laughing lizards, listening and writing bodies, tin roofs, metal beds, rain and echo, are what make up the vibrant materiality of language.<sup>[19]</sup>

Anticolonial writers know the damage anthropocentrism has unleashed onto the planet’s ecologies. Although it may seem counter-intuitive to insist that poetry written by humans is not anthropocentric, poetic attunements with the vital materiality of landscapes, things, animals, ecologies perform lively material formations through experimental writing as the mattering of *sound*. Ultimately, these sonic matters tell us that cross-culturality touches upon cross-materiality. For as Guyanese writer Wilson Harris asks: ‘Is there a language akin to music threaded into space and time which is prior to human discourse?’<sup>[20]</sup>

**Cite this piece as:**

Vourloumis, Hypatia. ‘The Sonic Ecologies of Anticolonial Writing’. *The Contemporary Journal* 3 (February 02, 2021).

[\[https://thecontemporaryjournal.org/strands/sonic-continuum/the-sonic-ecologies-of-anticolonial-writing\]](https://thecontemporaryjournal.org/strands/sonic-continuum/the-sonic-ecologies-of-anticolonial-writing).

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[1]

Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), vii.

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[2]

Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, ix.

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[3]

Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, x.

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[4]

Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xiii.

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[5]

Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xiii.

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[6]

Nathaniel Mackey, *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality and Experimental Writing* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000), 1.

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[7]

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[8]

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[9]

Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality*, 3.

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[10]

Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality*, 190.

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[11]

Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality*, 11-12.

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[12]

Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice: The development of nation language in Anglophone Caribbean poetry* (London: New Beacon Books, 1984), 5.

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[13]

Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, 13.

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[14]

Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, 10.

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[15]

Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, 18.

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[16]

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[17]

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[18]

Henk Maier, 'Stammer and the Creaking Door', *Clearing a Space: Postcolonial Readings of Modern Indonesian Literature*, eds. Keith Foulcher and Tony Day (Leiden: Brill, 2002): 74.

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[19]

Remy Sylado, *Puisi Mbeling* (Jakarta: KPG, 2004), 53.

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[20]

Wilson Harris, 'The Music of Living Landscapes,' *Selected Essays of Wilson Harris: The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination*, ed. Andrew Bundy (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 1999), 40.