

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

[In the excerpted section, I introduce my argument that “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.” I also explain what liberal cognition is and how sound might invite us to think and be differently.]

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 landscapes remain indistinct in their alterity. The increasingly sparse descriptions of both town and tundra that do little to distinguish one piece of ice from another construct an almost homogenous, 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 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 is, instead, an invitation to listen. But 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 “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.

[...]

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 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 lightening, 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 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.

These affective forms, visceral yet lacking the kind of detail or mimesis that makes recognizable, become 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 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.

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.

[...]

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