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# Duets and Deadness

Josh Epstein
*Portland State University*, j.epstein@pdx.edu



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*Josh Epstein (jepstein@pdx.edu)*

> Someone said: "The dead writers are remote from us because we *know* so much more than they did." Precisely, and they are that which we know.
>
> —T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent"

> When I count, there are only you and I together.
>
> —T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (1922)

Like many who regularly teach *The Waste Land*, I find myself struggling to formulate classes that not only encourage collaboration but thematize it, by working through the various kinds of interactivity performed by the text itself. It is a deeply collaborative poem in every respect, down to its very composition. And the interactive quality of the poem—its intertextual borrowings across both time and space, theatrical exchanges of voices in public houses, operatic interjections of Thames-Sisters—saturates its language and form. All of these lively exchanges notwithstanding, I often find it a struggle to talk about the multiple aural presences of the poem without watching them land with "dead sound" right in front of me.

In a seminar on modernism and media, I tried again. The class focused especially (though not exclusively) on technologies of sound recording. So, after some preliminary setup, I showed students a 1991 duet between Natalie Cole and her late father Nat "King" Cole, singing "Unforgettable." The use of this video was prompted by the work of two musicologists, Jason Stanyek and Benjamin Piekut, who have written about the cultural politics of recorded "collaborations" between the living and the dead, including

"Unforgettable" as well as duets between the Hank Williamses Jr. and Sr., and tribute albums to Notorious B.I.G. and Bob Marley.[1] In an essay called "Deadness," Stanyek and Piekut argue that in collaborations the dead body and voice meet with live ones in what they call an "intermundane" realm, neither living nor dead. Stanyek and Piekut coin the neologism "corpaural" to think about the ways that embodied sounds escape from one body and cling to others. If any poem is intermundane, we'd have to include *The Waste Land*—the "Unforgettable" duet, in this context, resonates not only with the poem but with Eliot's poetic theories, and echoes the uncanny dislocation of reading a century-old poem as if it were part of a timeless order. It also precipitates questions central to media history and theory about the status of, say, a gramophone—something that freezes the live voice into wax, or that preserves the voices of one's deceased relatives in a semipermanent un-dead state. In its way, the intermundane "involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence" ("Tradition and the Individual Talent").

For our class, then, my hope was that we might dust off Eliot's magisterial claim that the living artist gains meaning only in relation to the dead, as something that decenters the poem's cultural prestige, and reconceive how the poem treats music and text as collaborative and "corpaural," not just in the uncannily nostalgic ways seen in the Cole/Cole performance, but in more challenging forms. Collaboration in *The Waste Land* is hardly innocent, and can rarely be isolated from violence, a problem to which our class discussion cycled frequently. Still, as an entry point, I asked students to reconceive of one portion of the poem as a duet, informed by whatever contexts they wished so long as it reckoned closely with the

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[1] Jason Stanyek and Benjamin Piekut, "Deadness: Technologies of the Intermundane," *TDR: The Drama Review* 54, no. 1 (2010): 14–38.

"Deadness" essay and the poem's aesthetic choices. ("Deadness" is pitched a bit high for some undergraduates, but asking them to work through passages in groups allowed them to work through much of what they needed.)

In response to this task, students devised a few live performances of some of the dialogues/duets in the poem itself: between characters or figures, between living figures and deceased ones, between texts, between different time scales. A "live" student presenter led us through a collective performance of sections of the poem in concert with Eliot's own recorded voice (his face on the YouTube page looming over the classroom, like the Wizard of Oz). This duet with Eliot focused our attention on the formal properties of meter and rhythm, particularly in those passages of the poem that feel like duets between spoken voices and interior ones. One pair of students used the manuscripts to perform a duet between Eliot and Pound, coupling a not-bad imitation of Eliot's voice with occasional interruptions of "PERHAPS BE DAMNED!" There was an animated chess game, in homage to the title of "A Game of Chess," and though none of the students tackled it, the famous love-duet of Wagner's *Tristan* would have been low-hanging fruit (in principle—not in execution!). I had not, alas, yet learned about the Twitter bot that remixes lines from Eliot with lines from Taylor Swift.

Using the "Unforgettable" video as an initial thought-experiment, our class was able to trace several paths through *The Waste Land*, and our own critical dispositions toward it. Eliot's claim that the living artist gains meaning only in relation to the dead seemed to lose a little bit of its mustiness. This video in which liveness and deadness were made to seem entirely provisional categories, bound to proliferating media and marketable forms of sentimental nostalgia, reanimated some of Eliot's ambivalence toward the potentially enlivening effects of live music and deadening effects of mass media. One student noted the

"dead sound at the stroke of nine"—the idea that sound itself was marked as both "dead" and unpredictably resonant and "unpredictably durative" in its effects, "indirect, delayed, unintended, and even unmarked."[2] She also suggested that Eliot's perplexing footnote to this line, "a phenomenon that I have often noted," might not be a singularly unhelpful gloss on the poem, so much as a register of the intermundane, the mediated cultural labor that exceeds individual agency. I found my own pedagogical resistance to Eliot's footnotes met with promising questions about the text's allusiveness as a form of intermundanity, rather than as a one-directional effort to establish the poem's authority.

The exercise found some productive resistance, as well. We found ourselves increasingly conscious of the risks of sentimentalizing this "intermundane" as a playful trope, or papering over the gendered violence that accompanies the poem's many voices. We were pressed to think about how the poem's "corpaural" effects produced not the gauzy nostalgia of "Unforgettable," but trauma, rage, and destabilizing ellipsis. As Ria Banerjee has astutely written, this poem urges us to reexamine our "readerly fear and disgust […] recently resensitized by national political events" such as #MeToo, and to "rehear," in the poem's exhausted and indifferent voices, "injury that demands a corrective."[3] We talked, too, about questions of disability; the students' inclusion of captions and subtitles in whatever media they used, an inclusive gesture in its own right, reinscribed what the poem itself does as a written text (anyone who has seen the ululating Rhinemaidens captioned in an opera hall has wondered, on some level, about the bare matter of consonants and vowels). As we moved

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[2] Stanyek and Piekut, "Deadness,"18.

[3] Ria Banerjee. "Time," "Reading 'The Waste Land' with the #MeToo Generation," ed. Megan Quigley. *Modernism/modernity* (March 4, 2019), https://doi.org/10.26597/mod.0100.

through the course to texts by Woolf, Forster, Rhys, and Selvon, we were also called to confront the conflicted imperial politics of sound across modernist texts, including Eliot's. A host of unresolved questions surfaced, both in the students' experiments and in their writing.

Though this discussion dated before the emergence of COVID-19, could it stir some new life into remote teaching, exhausting as it is in its new extractions of mental work, but perhaps usefully estranging in terms of how and why we value "live teaching" in relation to voices from the past? I have not had the chance to repeat this experiment, but given our unsettled (and unequally distributed) work as teachers, this may be just the time to rethink our relation to, well, time: to the "liveness" of a text or a sound medium, a text's afterlives in the classroom, and the classroom itself as a space of mediated exchange. My feelings about the proliferation of online classes, Zoom sessions, and the like are mixed (to put it mildly), but these media offer plenty of new paths. Never in my life did I think that words like "asynchronous" would be common currency for undergraduate students. I am not the first to note that *The Waste Land* is, in its way, an asynchronous learning environment—one that flattens out multiple literary and historical time scales and reanimates surprising forms of teamwork. Might those of us who find online teaching tiring (and depressingly neoliberal) in its ongoing demands for "adaptive instructional best practice assessment" want to be just as careful about fetishizing the live classroom or, at least, to be less antiquated about the needs of working students to grapple with these texts on their own timelines rather than on mine? To duet well is both to listen and to make noise; why should that reciprocal generosity have to be synchronous? *The Waste Land* offers a call for some introspection about our own pedagogical commitments, not only intellectually but in the practical work of listening to the text, and to other listeners.