

Listening to Wind-Song: Soundscapes, Nets, and the

Music of *The Tempest*

When Ferdinand questions “where should this music be? i’ th’ air or th’ earth?” (1.2.387) in response to Ariel’s first song, he propels into motion a continuous state of flux between ‘airy’ and ‘earthly’ music that pervades the rest of the play. The question holds practical weight on a staging level - indeed, Ariel’s airy ‘highbrow’ music is sometimes performed with actors playing Ariel in suspension. The music of the earth - of the island and its roots - have a different depth and are staged accordingly, sometimes coming from the pit. The music imbues the island with a luxurious synaesthetic aural presence, and it is a music that is consistently accented by a framework of the earth and air, just as Ferdinand observes. It is also largely “dispersed music, performed as if it came from all over the stage” (Seng, 1967, p.252) - ‘Full Fathom Five’ in this scene is very much a song of the wind, filled with “double meanings” (Henze, 2000, p.25) in the same way that other, non-musical sounds are described as being “sung i’th’ wind” (2.2.19-20). Trinculo hears the singing wind, as does Alonso as it sings his crimes (3.3.96-98). Each character “hears his own concerns in the song of the wind” (Barzilai, 2019, p.393) - thus wind-song, unlike curated music or the sounds of the island plants and animals, is associated with musicality, spirituality, confessing sins, prophesying, or carrying prayers. Both Marina Warner’s *Indigo* (1992) and Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* (1988) pull at the threads of this latent idea woven through the fabric of *The Tempest*’s (1611) text and performance in their respective retellings. *Indigo* acts as a refractive mirror to *The Tempest*; where Ferdinand hears music “above” (1.2.485) him, so Sycorax listens to the voices of the islanders in the wind above her tree-tomb. But it is *Mama Day* that ultimately has authority on the meanings of this latent wind-song - Naylor’s novel is deeply place specific and more authentic to a Black spiritual tradition

that Warner cannot access. For Warner, the legacy of wind-song is one laden with questions of post-colonial politics and used primarily to build atmospheric pressure. For Naylor, wind-song is pre-colonial, a melody to be listened to intently and intentionally with the inner ear. But for both, music is at the eye of the storm of *The Tempest*.

The Tempest's ubiquitous musicality oscillates between opiate sounds in elaborate masques and more discordant noises, like the "tempestuous noise of thunder" (1.1.1) that opens the play and "more diversity of sounds, all horrible" (5.1.233-4). My primary argument that the music is underwritten with elemental coding is surprisingly critically underexplored given that in the seventeenth century the word *air* had a variety of musical associations and "could refer to any melody" (Cohen, 2013, p.72). *Indigo* builds upon these aural frameworks of *The Tempest* and continues the thematic binary of the elemental encoded within it. Warner begins Part II (taking place on Liamuiga, a Caribbean reimaging of Shakespeare's island) with a line that both emphatically reveres Shakespeare and introduces her own most impactful shift: "the isle is full of noises, so they say, and Sycorax is the source of many" (p.77). Her very speech "fall[s] from the mouth of the wind" (p.77), a cascading, tumbling movement of wind-song in her own right. There is a full investment in the somatic self; Sycorax is the source, not the commander, and is in this way perhaps more similar to Shakespeare's Ariel than her intended counterpart in Prospero. The most important sounds of *Indigo*, however, are undoubtedly the prayers and songs of the islanders that Sycorax hears in her immortal grave through the wind and earth above her. Buried upright, "her mouth gapes open in the direction of the ground above" (p.211), in a dizzying disorientation of order and element, as she listens to the "soft messages in the air" (p.213). In immortal death, she is no longer a source of the noises of the isle; she is a receptive force. Her lament upon hearing these messages is a clear palimpsest of Prospero's speech in

Act 5. Both speeches have a lapidary brilliance to them in their sensory references to “dread rattling thunder” (5.1.46) and Sycorax’s “rattle of the fleshy leaves” (p.213); hearing “roaring” (5.1.44) and “singing” (p.213) in their surroundings. Sycorax’s lament, too, is laden with elemental wording: “oh airs and winds, you bring me stories from the living, rustle of leaves and heaves of branches, you speak to me of pain” (p.211). Within the lilting rhythm of “living,” “leaves,” and “heaves,” we see an affiliation of air with history and speech, and earth with bodily pain and trauma. This runs true both backwards to Early Modern thoughts on higher and lower elements and to Naylor’s thoughts on history embedded within wind-song. But Sycorax refuses to reconcile past with present, voice with silence. She laments the “slit ankles” of Dule/Caliban and that Ariel “does not speak” (p.213). These are significant in terms of their own microcosmic invalidation of their affiliation with air or freedom; Dule’s shattered legs prohibit him now from performing his ladder dance, “hanging in the air” (p.96) and throwing a ladder “between earth and sky” (p.97). Ariel’s beautiful voice, which is a key musical feature of *The Tempest* and almost even more so in *Indigo*, can no longer airily “sing with laughter in her voice” (p.115); instead, her voice is “so dry now” that Kit thinks he hears her “in the scraping of the boughs of trees, the footfalls in the dusty earth” (p.185). Coleridge describes Shakespeare’s Ariel as a “May Blossom” suspended between heaven and earth by a “fanning breeze,” only by “compulsion, touching earth” (Coleridge, 1811, p.136-7). In Warner’s post-colonial assessment, Ariel touches earth, destined to become a ‘May blossom,’ rooted finally and inevitably in the trees she lives inside in *Indigo* and is imprisoned within in *The Tempest*.

Echoes of *The Tempest*’s wind-song weave through *Indigo*, but it lacks something fundamental: air through bedsprings. In photographer Carrie Mae Weems’ 1992 Sea Islands series, depicting an African American community (descended from the Gola tribe) on the Sea Islands off South

Carolina and Georgia, one photograph captures a bedspring wedged into the fork of a tree.¹ The bedspring is a ritual meant to ensnare evil spirits - the wind whistles through the bedsprings, which themselves exist bound both to “th’earth” (the trees) and to “th’air”; wind turns to song. Drawing obstacles and sounding boundaries in the bedspring transforms this practical piece of nature into a moment of deep and intense spirituality - indeed, into music. Weems “has insisted on rituals [...] wherein intuition, magic, dream lore are all acknowledged to be ways of knowing” (bell hooks, 1995, p.71-72). Just as in *The Tempest*, magic and music create a constellation of ontological affect and spirituality - informing cultural practices that Warner taps into, but Naylor finishes.

It is these practices, the living breathing history of Black American experience, that Naylor uses in her novel’s wind-song. *Mama Day* is, as I have posited, fundamentally different to Warner’s in her use of music - and this difference is enabled not solely by Naylor’s personal cultural capital, but also by the island she imagines. Unlike Warner’s colonised Liamuiga, Naylor’s Willow Springs is fantastical in its postcolonial - I might even say non-colonial, as far as anything can be - utopia. This is an island untouched, home to wind-songs unhindered and cultural practices that flourish. George, the outsider, is unsettled by those “weird, unnatural rituals behind those dogwoods” and constantly searches for “some rational explanation for what I had seen, another custom I wasn't privy to” (p.260). But Naylor “draws upon her heritage of the African sensibility to evoke the presence of the ‘supernatural’ as a natural constituent of everyday life” (Tally, 1998, p.2) and in doing so, weaves the echoes of *The Tempest*’s songs through her own bedsprings. The matriarch of *Mama Day* as much as Sycorax is to *Indigo*,

¹ See Figure 1.

Miranda is a true “spirit of the woods” (p.78-79) - she “knows every crook and bend, every tree that falls” (p.117). Miranda is haunted, though, by the nebulous sound the air makes, not the earth that she knows so well. She must look upward, like Sycorax in her grave, and listen to the wind-song:

[Miranda] tries to listen under the wind. The sound of a [...] long wool skirt passing. Heavy leather doors. And the humming - humming of some lost and ancient song. Quiet tears start rolling down Miranda’s face [...] listen to the wind from the Sound. Maybe it would come to her.

(p.118)

But the message eludes Miranda in the wind, just as it eludes Warner’s *Indigo*. Miranda may only access the full history imbued in the “lost and ancient song” when she moves to the Other Place - to the house of history, of culture, and ultimately of myth. Perhaps wind-song is intimately tied into a particular sense of place, and of belonging, given that Cocoa is attacked by these voices in the air only when she passes through the Other Place with George - “as soon as I put the moss in my shoes, I could hear them all in the wind as it moved through the trees” (p.223). George is unaffected and cannot hear the wind’s message, which tells Cocoa “over and over again: you’ll break his heart” (p.224). He does not “know this place” (p.223), has no cultural tie to it, and can only hear air through trees (and bedsprings). It is only through death that he becomes part of Willow Springs in an intangible but inextricable way - the novel ends with Cocoa periodically coming to Willow Springs to talk to George’s spirit over The Sound. When Miranda passes away, she too joins this symphony in the wind: Abigail “turns her face up into the warm air ‘You there, Sister?’ - to listen for the rustling of the trees” (p.312). The novel has been sounding the voices in the wind throughout, but we have not had the knowledge

to fully understand the implications of it - only now, with the full story of the myth of Sapphira Wade available to us, may we listen to them. Warner, without this cultural knowledge, must suffer the same barrier that George does. Lamothe notes that Naylor “imagines the possibility of cultural integrity even when the actual ground that the characters stand on is always shifting and changing” (Lamothe, 2005, p.168) - an accurate analysis of cultural solidity, except that perhaps here it is not the ground that is shifting. It is the air - that unpredictable, tumbling wind-song “falling from the mouth” of history that holds the essence of cultural history.

The connection of the musicality of *The Tempest* and its many adaptations is rarely linked to the play’s obvious elemental aesthetics - surprising, given that music and sound are very literally vibrations in air. The music of *The Tempest* is absolutely some of the most important and plot-specific of Shakespeare’s canon, and its continued presence in *Indigo* and *Mama Day* is very much felt. But they deal with this legacy in different ways; for Warner, the effect of the colonial presence in the novel creates a flux just as Ferdinand’s question does - Ariel’s airy music becomes raspy; Dule’s shattered hamstrings can no longer climb his ladders to the sky; Sycorax’s burial ground, deep underneath the roots of its tree, still receives the songs of the winds. Voices are muted, sounds persist. But in *Mama Day*, it is listening to these voices with intention that is insisted upon. Shakespeare is the earth, that solid ground we know. Now we must listen to the air, to Naylor, to find the history within the music, like Miranda finally does. Perhaps despite the colonial footprints of history, and in the echoing sounds of Shakespeare, we might find it in the songs of the wind. The rest is music.

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Figure 1.

Carrie Mae Weems, 'Untitled,' from *Sea Island Series* (1992/2000). Available online at:

<https://whitney.org/collection/works/19205> <Date Accessed: 14/01/2024>