Samuel Beckett's Radio Geographies

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Abstract:
Throughout his work, Samuel Beckett interrogates the idea that voice is an authentic conduit for identity. Radio distorts, edits, and projects speech, and so broadcasting was a natural choice for his lifelong experiment. Both objects – radio and voice – are also fundamentally spatial. They distribute waves of sound across a given terrain. Beckett's interest in radio is abstract, in that the medium allows him to investigate general concerns about the construction of subjectivity – the ways in which we are all subject to disparate voices. But the writer's engagement with radio also arises against the backdrop of specific material conditions in post-War France and Europe. These were the years that French spatial theory took up the problem of urban modernisation. Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* was published in 1957, the same year that Beckett wrote his first radio play, and also the same year that work began on Le Périphérique, Europe's first ring road. This paper investigates Beckett's radio plays against the backdrop of urban theory (*urbanisme*), arguing that Beckett's work can reveal light on theories of space, even urban geography.

Keywords: Urbanism; modernisation; Paris; media; voice.

Samuel Beckett may not be the first name that comes to mind when we explore the relationship between literature and space.[1] James Joyce is the most common example of an author whose work is inseparable from its setting. The author of *Ulysses* hoped, after all, that Dublin, in the unlikely event of its destruction, could be rebuilt brick-by-brick from a study of his novel.[2] Beckett's prose and plays, by contrast, are mostly portrayed as abstract in their settings. Often read as

existentialist reflections on the absurdity of life, his texts appear to take place in a void. His comic-tragic characters move slowly and awkwardly through a featureless environment toward uncertain destinations. For a Marxist like Adorno, Beckett's 'meaninglessness' and 'chimerical' dramatic settings are the materialist point; that is to say, the lack of place and concrete particulars underscore the fact that the 'modern era is obsolete' and that 'world of experience [. . .] is a process of wastage'.[3] Beckett features in few of the literary anthologies and syllabi that seek to show the vital connection between literary works and their real-world settings.[4] While it's impossible to think about Charles Dickens without London, or Thomas Pynchon without Los Angeles, Beckett's geographies are assumed to take place in some other ethereal reality. His closed, claustrophobic works, such as *Endgame*, or, indeed, the agoraphobic *Waiting for Godot*, depict sites that appear in dreams or nightmares. His characters, too, exist in these uncanny places, trapped among the half-remembered past, an anxious present, and an unknown future. Beckett's own personal biography also occupies the in-between: he lived much of his life on the move between Dublin and Paris, between postcolonial Ireland and cosmopolitan France. Later, when finally settled in France, he travelled most months of the year between his rural French retreat in Ussy-sur-Marne and his hectic life of connections and business in Paris. In short, Beckett's work and life have been interpreted most often as typifying uprooted homelessness and stylistic restlessness.

When Beckett does overlap directly with geography, the conceptual nature of his texts allows for a vast range of locations and situations to be projected onto them. The simplicity and minimalism of his stage directions encourage an openness and freedom of adaptation. The sole description for the stage in *Waiting for Godot* – 'A country road. A tree' – has permitted directors and audiences to interpret the play liberally.[5] Susan Sontag famously produced the play in Sarajevo as the bombs fell.[6] A modern version took place on the stoops of abandoned homes in post-Katrina New Orleans.[7] The Court Theatre set the drama in a South Side of Chicago park.[8]

The motivation behind this essay is to rethink Beckett's relationship to geography and, as strange as it may seem, initially, to urban planning. My goal is not to convert Beckett into a Joyce or a Dickens, writers in the realist tradition whose characters can be followed on a map. Beckett is not like this. The whole point of *Godot*, after all, is that neither time nor place are known. Disorientation is the form and the content. I wish, rather, to suggest that Beckett poses more fundamental questions about space, questions he began

to ask as he witnessed the changing infrastructure of modernising cities, in particular Paris, in the years after World War II. When Beckett examines the role of the modern subject – its fragility and purpose – I argue that he also takes up the question of positionality: Who is speaking, and where is that subject located with regard to others? Does a voice, one's own or another's, have an identifiable origin? Does occupying a position in space (and time) equate to knowledge? These questions are philosophical in nature. Indeed, one might say that French philosophy in the 1950s and 1960s, as represented by Gaston Bachelard, Frantz Fanon, Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault and Michel de Certeau, is obsessed with the themes of space and power. For Beckett, too, space – trying to situate oneself in it and attempting to move through it – is a central theme. His characters become increasingly trapped in a series of closures and dead ends. Beckett, however, does not examine the production of space through representing known places on a realist map. Rather, he approaches the connection between subjectivity and confinement through an analysis of the spatial elements of the particular medium within which he is working. What interests him as he moves from drama to radio, from mime to television, from poetry to fiction, are the possibilities and limitations within each genre. We might say that he is first and foremost a media critic. He knows the history and explores the structures of his chosen forms. When thinking through the dialectics of space – the relationship between the physical and the experiential – he begins, therefore, not by painting a recognisable street or landscape, but rather by exploring the limits of the technology and medium itself. With regards to radio, for example, he probes where it is located, and what it can do differently than physical theatre. What kinds of voices can be put on the air that cannot be put on the stage? What is the reach of radio, and how can a soundscape, even silence, influence thought and practice?

Beckett investigated the space of the theatre, as well as the space of the novel, film, television, and radio. Radio is the main focus of this article. Each of these media presented him with the opportunity to examine the constraints of an inherited form. Ontology (what we know) can never be separated from epistemology (how we know). Theatre, for example, stages live action. Its truth depends upon embodied dialogue and physical movement. The boundaries of the stage enable that medium's possibilities and limitations. Krapp, for example, in *Krapp's Last Tape*, exits and enters his 'den,' moving from the deep dark corners at the edge of the stage to the foregrounded

silhouetted light in the middle of it. It is an image that combines sound and physical movement within a tight theatrical frame. The oppressive darkness of the space magnifies the protagonist's solitude. The rigidly mapped-out borders of the proscenium – 'not more than four or five steps either way' – illustrate Krapp's limited possibilities.[9] The stage setting, confining and in shadow, mirrors Krapp's mental state. The power of the image rests in the material space.

Radio, by contrast, is marked by absence, and a lack of corporality. It separates voice from body. Radio, at least in its early days, was associated with a kind of ghostly presence – voices that, in Beckett's own words, 'appear to come out of the dark'.[10] The connection between radio and the supernatural goes back to the medium's origin. Edison's phonography and Marconi's wireless were both perceived as gateways to intangible worlds and the occult. Their devices were repositories of dead voices. The mystery of voice, in particular its source and origin, drives the entire Beckett oeuvre. From where does voice emanate? Does a voice reside in some inner space of personal authenticity or conscience, such as the soul, conscience, or memory? Or does a voice emerge outside of oneself, in one's cultural inheritance? Voice for Beckett is a spatial problem. Its location is both inside and outside, now and then, here and there. Radio and voice sever speech from body, presence from physicality, and familiarity from intimacy.

Beckett's themes of haunting memories, characters out of place, and individuals bullied by technologically amplified and authoritarian voices are well suited for radiophonic adaptation. By now, three generations of scholars have examined Beckett's decision to tune into radio. Clas Zilliacus was the first to compile a comprehensive history of Beckett's engagement with the BBC for each of his six dramatic pieces for radio.[11] His book, written long before Beckett Studies became the academic industry that it is now, charted the symbiotic relationship between the author's efforts to reach a wider audience, the texts' efforts to experiment with sound ('my work is a matter of fundamental sounds', Beckett wrote to his American editor),[12] and the BBC's own interest in promoting quality material on its Third Programme. In the 1990s, as Beckett Studies became canonical, Marjorie Perloff and Everett Frost promoted the radio plays as being as important as the writer's drama and fiction. Frost, an academic, who also produced some of the plays, interprets the work as 'modernist and thoroughly immersed in the medium' for which it was written.[13] Marjorie Perloff also focuses on the medium's unique ability to create soundscape and

to stir the listener's imagination. With no visual clues, each listener can create their own ambient imagery. She quotes Martin Esslin on radio's power as 'an intensely visual medium':

> Information that reaches the listener through other senses is instantly converted into visual terms. And aural experiences, which include the immense richness of language as well as musical and natural sound, are the most effective means of triggering visual images.[14]

Again, the emphasis is on the psychological and the subjective. Though the medium of radio is at the heart of Perloff's reading, little attention is paid to the radio's territorial paradox: that its sense of intimacy depends upon its geographical distance, and that a voice projected from an unknown source has the ability to reach around the globe. Time and distance get collapsed in the radio voice. The world and the personal merge in a person's mind, and in their living room. Contemporary critics, in the wake of the rise of Sound Studies, have maintained this interest in exploring the place of Beckett's radiophonic material in the renewed field of Radio Studies. Emilie Morin reads Beckett's quest for 'vocal shadow' in light of his long, indirect, collaboration with a range of inventors and artists, from Thomas Edison, through André Breton and the surrealists, to Pierre Schafer and experimental BBC Radiophonic Workshop.[15] A recent collection of essays returns us to the intricacies of Beckett's contracts, contacts, and editing history with the BBC, as well as detailing the process by which Beckett's poetry and sections of his novels, such as *Comment C'est/How It Is*, were adapted for the auditory public sphere.[16] What interests these critics is radio's technically driven ability to access and broadcast psychological interiority. A voice divorced from bodily gesture is, the theory suggests, a purer, less mediated expression of mind and emotion.

Beckett sought out radio in order to better examine how the production, distribution, and reception of that technology could further his own thematic ends, defined, in part, by a questioning of the authoritarian voice. Radio and voice are uncanny objects, for at the centre of both phenomena is the question of their whereabouts. Where is radio? In the air? In your head? In a distant radio tower? In a studio? Likewise, where is voice centralised? Voice, as we know, from Derrida, is simultaneously present and absent. Derrida, in fact, launches his career of deconstruction with a series of questions not unlike Beckett's about the radio voice. In his first book, *Voice and Phenomena* (1967), Derrida sets out to undermine Husserl's attempt to reduce objects and our knowledge of them to some kind of essence or

ontological given. Derrida summarises Husserl's argument in *Logical Investigations* (1900).[17] In that text, writes Derrida, Husserl sets out to discover 'the objectivity of an object'.[18] The quest for Husserl is to uncover what remains truthful in an object after constant repetitions, after multiple investigations. What endures 'independent of the hic et nunc of events'?[19] For Husserl, the ideal object, the thing that does not fall into 'mundanity' (the contingencies of the social world) is that of the voice.[20] Derrida summarises Husserl's argument about the status of the voice: 'My words are alive because they seem not to leave me, seem not to fall outside of me, outside of my breath, into a visible distance'.[21] For Husserl the voice is within and it is knowable. It is reconcilable with the thoughts of its owner. By contrast, what is distant and far – the voice of the Other, perhaps – remains unknown, and, as such, is prone to anonymity. Derrida has no time for Husserl's grand illusions about belonging and identity, the unity of voice and subject. Derrida's political vision is to deconstruct any claim of synthesis between a voice and a true meaning. Neither the voice inside, nor that outside, is original and pure. Neither is capable of reduction to an essence. For Derrida, unlike Husserl, the 'outside is neither the world' nor is 'the inside the solitary life of the soul'.[22] For Derrida, ambiguity resides at the heart of the spoken word, just as it does in writing. There is tension between the voice's immediacy and what escapes it. There is always more than what is said. But where does this 'more' emanate from? Memory? Desire? Unconscious political bias? All of these traces?

The appearance of voice as a theoretical object in need of interdisciplinary investigation during the late 1950s and '60s by Derrida, Beckett and others is not, I wish to argue, disconnected from a crisis within the fields of geography and planning. From Gaston Bachelard through Henri Lefebvre to Guy Debord, just as for the literary critics, the imperative became to rescue individual and resistant voices, along with the spaces that housed them, from the processes of governmental logic and development. Modern urban planning, strange as it may sound at first, is also confronted by the question of the voice. In the post-war years, when Beckett had finally settled in Paris, the city underwent another one of its waves of transformation and upheaval. In the French capital, De Gaulle-inspired modernisation during the late 1950s and '60s is best represented by the construction of Le Périphérique, Europe's first ring road. Along the outer edge of Le Périphérique, which opened completely in April 1973, the engineers and architects of urbanism established the infamous banlieues.[23] Low-income housing projects (HLMs, or Habitation à Loyer Modéré – Housing at Low Rent)

were erected, for example, in Saint-Ouen-sur-Seine and Bondy, areas that edged up against the old city. They were constructed to house immigrants from North Africa, along with the native working class of Paris. Le Périphérique would keep at bay the inhabitants of the city's notorious 'Ceinture Rouge', those communes, such as Ivry-sur-Seine and Malakoff, that border Paris proper and were dominated by the Communist Party during most of the twentieth century. Building began on Le Périphérique in the late 1950s. The first phase of the new motorway was built from Porte de la Plaine to Place d'Italie. That segment was also the one nearest to Beckett's apartment at 38 Boulevard St. Jacques, under a kilometre away. Le Périphérique continues to serve today as another of Paris's famous walls, a new fortification of sorts, between those displaced from and unable to access the historic, gentrifying, and museum-dominated core of the historic city. *Urbanisme*, as the French labelled their new and updated discipline of urban planning, was also the title of an early Le Corbusier book, published in 1925, in which he first laid out his plans to bulldoze central Paris and replace its historic buildings with large housing blocks. These blocks, or Unités, would stand tall and separate from each other in open, green areas. Housing 2,700 people per unit, each of his densely packed residential buildings, in the spirit of cooperation, was to accommodate craft workshops, swimming pools, gyms, cafés, shops, and restaurants. Some were even designed to have a beach. What holds Corbusier's original concept together with those later iterations built along Le Périphérique was a vision, through the discipline of urban planning, to administer in an integrated fashion all elements of modern life, from economics and housing to health and leisure, via spatial rationalisation. It is this rationalised Cartesian sensibility that enthralled and repulsed Beckett his entire career.

Urbanisme concerned itself, therefore, with regulating which voices could remain in the urban centre and which would be pushed to the margins. Planning also required rethinking the space of the nation and what its collective voice would sound like in an age of decolonisation. For phenomenologists, such as the geographer Gaston Bachelard, urbanisation and American-style modernisation, typified by increased speed of motion, suburbanisation, consumerism, and zoning, were the primary challenges of in post-war France. For Bachelard, in his pioneering work of psychogeography, *The Poetics of Space*, what is being lost in modern urban space is the voice of tradition, or, as he put it when describing an old Parisian house, those 'inflections of beloved voices now silent'.[24] *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard's masterpiece, was published in 1957, the same year that construction began on Le

Périphérique. 1957 was also the year that Beckett wrote *All That Fall*, his first radio play.

Beckett, I argue, is fundamentally a spatial thinker. He consistently explores the limits of Cartesian mapping: namely, what is fixed, knowable, and observable. Opposed to this Enlightenment project of determining space via objective examination, Beckett projects the uncertain, the deeply personal, and the restless. In his fiction, space becomes boundless and infinite, the subject disoriented and unsure. In the novel, *The Unnamable*, the voice of the narrator, stripped of all Cartesian coordinates, is left merely to reflect, to talk, to float in a sea of words and darkness. With no time and no space, the story (what is a story?) opens with the mysterious, expansive interrogatives: 'Where now? Who now? When now?'[25] During the Cold War, on a continent recently ravaged by nationalism, Beckett evokes voices that are most often frail and weak, and that resist easy identification. This is the very opposite of what the modern individual is taught to be: solid, authoritative, and secure.

Beckett turns to writing for radio in the late 1950s because he is drawn to the medium's ability to provoke an inner quality, one that Steven Connor calls 'mind space', that imaginative, evocative space of listening.[26] Electromagnetic waves have the ability to carry voices across vast, empty space. Radio emanates from a distant transmitter, yet it gets received by a listener often in our most private spaces – the bedroom, the car, the kitchen, the bathroom. In his 1957 radio play *Embers*, a man hears the voices of his dead father, his young daughter and his wife who are not physically present.[27] Everything that the radio listener hears is the interior, private monologue of an old man's memories, nostalgia percolating upward from within, but never spoken out loud to another. Voices that should maintain their silence or be kept apart intrude anxiously into each other. Radio has the ability to go through walls, bend around corners, travel at immense speed only to be slowed down and received in a quiet corner. A radio wave is magnetic energy thrown off in every direction. When picked up, radio is particularly personal and subjective. Radio and voice, therefore, trouble both theory and planning. For both radio and voice are difficult to pin down, to locate, and to regulate. They are resistant to disciplinary logic.

I wish now to explore the constellation of three geographical events that occur within a year of each other and that all take place at the moment when Beckett shifts from theatre to radio (and radio can never be abstracted from space). In 1957, Beckett turns from presenting bodies on stage to projecting disembodied voices over the

airwaves. I have mentioned the first of the three spatial events already: the building of Le Périphérique. The second I have also referenced: the publication in 1957 of *La Poétique de l'Espace*, by Gaston Bachelard. That book urges the reader to approach architecture and planning from a personal, lived, and emotional point of view rather than the standpoint of efficiency and rationalisation. Bachelard asks the post-war French public to reject the science of modern urban planning and its accompanying sociology of everyday life. I read Bachelard's intervention as a rebuke to projects such as Le Périphérique.

The third geographical event is the publication, in 1959, of Frantz Fanon's essay 'This Is the Voice of Algeria', from his book *A Dying Colonialism*.[28] Fanon's essay employs, surprisingly, a discussion of radio in its efforts to critique French imperialism in North Africa. Imperialism is ultimately a geographical project and radio assists Fanon's vision of both the postcolonial voice and postcolonial space. Radio is the technology charged with converting space into voice. Beckett's work in radio is a political intervention, both into the space and voice of the nation.

Samuel Beckett wrote six plays for radio. The BBC's Third Program produced the first, entitled *All That Fall*, in 1957.[29] He wrote his final piece, *Cascando*, in 1964.[30] The lack of physicality on the radio works well for Beckett's themes of privation and loss. Radio not only allows for greater imaginative power due to its lack of visual imagery, but the lack of a body also enhances a haunting, distant quality. This distance, though not, importantly, in Beckett's work, must be compensated for by what Roland Barthes calls 'the grain of the voice': a suitable timbre of trustworthiness that can fill in absence.[31]

All That Fall evokes nostalgia and a recognisably Irish setting. The speech of the characters is in a rural dialect. The place names and the diction (ditch, bog, arse) are in Hiberno-English. The play follows Maddie Rooney as she walks to the train station to meet her husband. Yet the play also defamiliarises sound and character. Along the way, Maddie meets various neighbours. In an early scene, she meets Christy, a seller of dung, naturally enough for Beckett, along the road. The text reads as follows: 'Do you find anything … bizarre about my way of speaking?' Maddie asks Christy. '[Pause.] I do not mean the voice. [Pause.] No, I mean the words. [Pause. More to herself.] I use none but the simplest words, I hope, and yet I sometimes find my way of speaking very … bizarre'.[32] In the opening to *All That Fall*, the directions called for the moo of a cow, the bleating of a sheep, and noise of other farmyard animals. While working with the BBC, however, the production team reproduced these sounds using

human voices – the tongue in the mouth for hooves, for example – in order to denaturalise the sound, and to make Maddie's walk to the station more internal. The journey – we listen as she walks – contains her gasping breath and footsteps, a relay of tape that creates ordered, structured sound. Other various noises (the train arriving, a passing cart, and various conversations, fading and spectral) evoke a resonant, suggestive quality, reliant on the listener's imaginative reception. Objective structure (a walk to the train, that recurring symbol of industrialisation), subjective hearing (the sounds are realistic inasmuch as we hear them as Maddie hears them), and the radio device (looping, amplification, exaggeration, sudden cut-offs) further the Beckettian mixture of interiority, rhythmic prose, exhortations to speak, balanced by refusals and silence, and voices mediated by technology.

Beckett's radio work, such as *All That Fall*, poses questions, therefore, about the status of the voice. Can a voice ever be truly captured, reproduced, and understood? In *Rough for Radio II* (1961), a sinister boss, a stenographer and a whip-handler, torture a victim called Fox (so close to Vox) in order to extort a voice that initially refuses to speak and then only mouths what appears to be untranslatable babble.[33] Official, state voices are unable to regulate the speech of the prisoner, one who may or may not hold answers. In a version with Harold Pinter as the lead voice, the upper crust English accent connects colonial violence to extortion.

Beckett also chose to deliver his post-war reflections as an ambulance driver and translator for the Irish Red Cross in the form of a radio address. He titled this talk *The Capital of Ruins* (1946).[34] He wrote it during the months following the Armistice, when he was helping to construct a new hospital in the Normandy town of St. Lô. The town had been almost completely destroyed during one night of allied bombing in 1944. In his speech, written for *Raidió Éireann*, the national Irish radio station, Beckett was careful not to paint an easy correspondence between the Irish aid workers and the French. He writes that 'their way of being we was not our way, and our of being they, was not their way'. And yet out of the 'obstacles' of translation and emerging from 'grotesque [...] energies of home and visiting temperaments', 'occasional glimpses of us in them and them in us appear[ed]'.[35] The medium of radio for his post-war statement furthers the message of the slippage. The slide between 'we and they' and the porousness of the radio wave is connected to the themes of decentred subjectivity and nations as traces.

Interest in the ontological aspects and the epistemological features of voice have re-emerged in cultural studies and critical theory

of late. In other words, what is a voice, and how we receive and trust voices, can never be separated. The growth of sound studies and radio theory is partly due to the rise of digital technology and the role that critics must play in testing its claims of accuracy and intimacy. In *A Voice and Nothing More*, Mladan Dolar tackles the status of the voice psychoanalytically.[36] For him, voice is the unattainable other, escaping even critical theory's efforts to define and locate it. Dolar reminds us that the origins of the word 'acoustics', the science of hearing, comes from the name for Pythagoras's disciples, the akousmati, who learned by listening to their master from behind a curtain, never being able to see him. The idea was that a good student would be tied to his Master's Voice, not distracted by the mentor's looks, clothes, or body language. The pupil had only to concentrate on voice and meaning. Picking up from Dolar, John Mowitt, in his book *Radio: Essays in Bad Reception*, engages theory's long obsession with the object of the voice, from the echoes heard in Plato's cave to Derrida's famous opening in *Of Grammatology*, which splits identity into presence and lack, speech and writing.[37] Mowitt contends that radio, as it got picked up and received by critical theory (from Brecht to Adorno to British cultural studies and postcolonial theory), poses questions about spatiality and the tension between the national and the local, between intimacy and expansiveness, between official radio and pirate radio. In probing voice, critical theory turns repeatedly to the radio, and examinations of radio quickly turn into discussions of space.

In his famous essay 'The Radio as a Communication Apparatus', Brecht, for example, takes up the possibilities of eclectic, populist material in the early days of radio.[38] '[I]n this Tower of Babel, cacophony and dissonance came forth that could not be ignored. In this acoustic department store it was possible to learn to breed chickens in English, accompanied by the strains of the Pilgrim's Chorus'.[39] English-trained chickens, American pilgrims, German department stores: radio, for Brecht, brings the near far and projects the local into infinity. Indeed, Beckett's more cacophonous moments (overlapping farm animals in *All That Fall*, erupting painful memories in *Embers*, the whip hitting a prisoner in *Rough for Radio II*) harken back to Weimar *Hörspiel*. *Hörspiel* is the German word for radio play, though the phrase carries associations of material written in the 1920s. During the Weimar period, writers and producers sought to establish plays that were not just stage plays read on the radio. Rather the *Hörspiel* connotes audio work that developed particularly radiophonic sound effects, such as background sound, echoes, and overlapping conversations. Beckett's efforts to create experimental drama, to

integrate music, sound, and silence (the Beckett joke: silence on the radio), are part of the tradition of Brecht, Weil, and Benjamin to create *Lehrstücke*, not just educational programming, but attempts to establish specific material for the medium of radio.

In his essay 'The Radio Voice', Adorno maintains that radio is obliged to ascribe personality to a distant announcer in order to compensate for the invisibility of the source.[40] 'This woman has a nice voice', he writes; or, 'This man has an arrogant voice'.[41] Beckett's voices resist such compensation. 'A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine'. This opening line from *Company*, a late prose piece, suggests the appeal of radio for Beckett.[42] In radio, everything is in the listening. Drama has been stripped of props, stage, lighting, and collective viewing. As he wrote about his first play:

> *All That Fall* is specifically a radio play, or rather radio text, for voices, not bodies. I have already refused to have it staged, as I cannot think of it in such terms. It is no more theatre than *Endgame* is radio and to act it is to kill it . . . Whatever quality it does have depends on the whole thing coming out of the dark.[43]

Radio, for Beckett, comes from a mysterious and distant point, yet is received intimately. For Adorno, radio sought to balance the remote, distant subject with Oedipal closeness, and a comforting and familiar voice. Beckett, along with Kakfa, is the hero of Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*.[44] Beckett's radio voices are so compelling to Adorno because they resist totalisation and always remain in the ether, in the sphere of flux, confusion, doubt, and unknowing. In this way, Beckett is very much aligned with the Frankfurt School tradition of theorising the medium of communication.

Beckett was also aware of radio's potential for political abuse. In his letters and notebooks from his time traveling through Germany in 1936 and 1937, he documents what he hears being broadcast: listened 'like a fool to 2 hours of Hitler and an hour of Goering (opening of Reichstag)'. Another time he notes hearing 'an interminable harangue by Goering on *Vierjahresplan*[four-year plan]'.[45] Beckett's voices – faint and isolated – can be seen as a direct response to the concept of a national acoustic so cultivated everywhere, not just during the years of World War II.

Beckett seeks to broadcast voices coming into being, voices that do not yet exist. We might call this the postcolonial voice, a fragmented, incomplete object as theorised by Frantz Fanon in 'This is the Voice of Algeria'. This famous essay theorising subaltern identity also listens in to the radio. Though written in 1959, Fanon's essay marks the

emergence of revolutionary radio in 1956, a year before Beckett's first broadcast play. As Fanon writes:

> it was 1956 [when] tracts were distributed announcing the existence of a Voice of Free Algeria. The broadcasting schedules and wavelengths were given. This voice 'that speaks from the mountains [djebels]' is not geographically limited, but bringing to all Algeria the great message of the Revolution, [it] at once acquired an essential value.[46]

The voice of 'Voice of Algeria' radio, Fanon writes, 'is often absent, physically inaudible, but it became materialized in an irrefutable way [...] The nature of this voice recalled in more than one way that of the Revolution: present "in the air" in isolated pieces, but not objectively'.[47] Very often, Fanon states, on account of bad reception, 'only the operator, his ear glued to the receiver, had the unhoped-for opportunity to hear the Voice. The other Algerians present in the room would receive the echo of this voice through the privileged interpreter'.[48] Before 1954, the [French] radio, Fanon writes, was associated with the official imperial voice. It was considered by Algerians 'an evil object anxiogenic and accursed'.[49] After the appearance of the Voice of Algeria in 1956, 'in hallucinatory psychoses, the radio voices become protective'.[50] Due to French jamming of wavelengths, hours of broadcasting were erratic, but behind the chaos, suggests Fanon, 'the listener would compensate for the fragmentary nature of the news by the creation of information. Not just reception, but production altered, too: Radio-electricians opened small shops [...] battery-operated receivers were in great demand'.[51] Ultimately, the 'Voice of Algeria led the life of a fugitive'.[52] More than that, there was no one voice:

> On the contrary, on the strict level of news, it was showing the desire to keep one's distance, to hear other voices, to take in other prospects. It was in the course of the struggle for liberation [...] that the Algerian experienced and concretely discovered the existence of voices other than the voice of the dominator which formerly had been immeasurably amplified because of his own silence.[53]

So, when the Voice of Algeria is heard to say, 'Here is the Voice of Algeria', where is that voice? In the mountains, in the town? It is like the 'Where when' voice of Beckett. When does the voice speak? Is it the voice of the past calling from history? Does it announce itself from the future? This is Algeria, a country, that is coming into being, but does not yet exist. There is, as Mowitt puts it, no cognitive mapping of the revolutionary voice.[54] In the same way, I am thinking about

Beckett's voices, which are also ethereal, escape easy identity, and resist sovereignty. The voice must be filled in by the collective for Fanon and by the auditor for Beckett. Beckett asks the listener to assist in the articulation.

Beckett, unlike Camus and Sartre, was reluctant to take an official stand on the Algerian War (1954–62), but he followed its events closely. *Les Editions de Minuit*, his publishing house, was bombed, because its owner, Jerome Lindon, published works encouraging French soldiers to desert. Lindon also published a series called *Documents* that established the use of torture by the French military. Beckett did, however, hide manuscripts in his apartment, and he funded friends whose political activities left them unable to find work. He never signed political manifestos, however. As an Irishman living in France on a visa, he feared he would be removed from the country for political activity. His anguished late short prose, though, speaks to the geopolitical situation through which he was living in France. His later work examines the deployment of torture, attacks on free speech, and restrictions on the movement of migrants, all of which were tactics deployed as part of French neo-colonial policies. Beckett's radiophonic spaces exist, temporally and geographically, alongside the metaphors and sense of dislocated place that Fanon employs to describe the voice of the Algerian revolution.

My argument, thus far, is that Beckett's radio makes an intervention in theory and in the evolution of radio studies. Beckett pushes the medium of radio toward its limit: that which cannot be communicated, the elusive voice – even silence. Beckett's transition to radio is a literary and technical experiment to think through the position of the modern subject, caught as it is between the aftermath of totalitarianism, the development of American-style consumerism, and the rupture of decolonisation. Behind changes in literary form, however, there are always geographical shifts. Just as behind Fanon's radio theory there are military tactics being developed to gain control of national territory and urban districts, so, too, behind Beckett's radio is a changing landscape, that of the French capital.

From its medieval walls through to its nineteenth-century boulevards and then to its modern banlieues, Paris has been the city most studied for uncovering the connections between revolution and city space, and between psychology and movement. Transformations to the Parisian landscape have been the common determining factor behind a range of modern literary aesthetics, from Baudelaire's urban poetics to the surrealist mappings of Louis Aragon and André Breton. During the years that Beckett thought about radio, the construction of

Le Périphérique, one of the greatest post-war French urban projects, began. Its construction, too, is not unconnected to the space of decolonisation.

The construction of Le Périphérique is the third geographical event, along with the publication of Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* and Fanon's essay theorising postcolonial Algeria, that helps to create a constellation of events through which one can better understand Beckett's work on radio. Le Périphérique was Europe's first fully completed ring road around a capital city, and it now carries 1.5 million cars a day.[55] It was granted planning permission in 1954. Construction began in 1956, and progress averaged 23cm an hour for 18 years. It opened in 1973 under the Presidency of George Pompidou. 'Circle of hell' and 'the ring of death' soon became two of its nicknames.[56] The term road rage was invented on it. By 1965, 'les énervés du volant' – nervous wrecks at the wheel – were being diagnosed. One dropped dead of a heart attack after a minor accident. Another got out of his car to assault an ambulance driver. Judges began to issue automatic six-day jail sentences for minor misdeeds on the route. 'Le Prince Noir' currently holds the illegal record for completing the 35-mile ring in 11 minutes and 4 seconds on motorbike.[57] The anxiety, the constant circular movement, the postmodern reinstatement of premodern fortifications, the anonymity of car drivers (the car radio was perfected in France at this time) must all have appealed to Beckett.

Le Périphérique acts as a new, loud, and constantly-in-motion fortress between the classical old city and the high-rise immigrant suburbs that form on the other side of its divide. As Beckett drove his beloved Citroen deux-chevaux to his writing retreat in Ussy-sur-Marne, he would have had to negotiate his route westward out of Paris around the zone on which the new road was being built. Le Périphérique was laid down atop the old 'transition zone', a ring of waste ground that sat beyond the old city walls.[58] Advancing armies would, therefore, have been forced to approach the fortifications exposed to the city's defenders. In the 1600s, 'La Zone', the periphery of Paris, attracted migrant labourers, rural workers, a transient population of peasants and bandits. A 'zonier', or 'zonard' in French, still refers to a loiterer. Working-class suburbs on the wrong side of Le Périph, such as Clichy-sous-Bois, still carry the wilderness frontier in their backwoods name: sous bois; below the forest. Bondy, another marginal suburb, refers to the 'Forest of Bondy'. Later, as peasant-landlord relationships broke down, the area of La Zone become known as the Red Belt. Le Périphérique was built on the open area outside the Thiers wall, named

after the President, Adolph Thiers, who insisted on new fortifications in 1815 after the Prussians defeated Napoleon. It was forbidden to build on land for 150 yards outside the wall. In subsequent decades, however, the Zone, as it came to be known, acted as what Foucault might call a heterotopia. Circus acts came to reside in it. The Parisian bourgeoisie would picnic on it, as made famous in impressionist painting. Immigrants from eastern Europe, then those from North Africa, then those from Indochina would flock to it and live there. Many became stuck, caught in the transition zone like a Beckett antihero. Indeed, the definitive translation of the 1912 poem, 'Zone', by the surrealist Apollinaire, was completed by Beckett in 1950.[59]

So, to the outcasts of famine Ireland, and the refugees of World War II, who are projected onto the spaces of Beckett's plays and fiction, we can now add the gypsies, the unemployed, and the war deserters whom Beckett would have seen on the Parisian outskirts and in his literary creations.

Le Périphérique epitomised modernising, increasingly revisionist, France. The road illuminated the bureaucratic and integrated elements of *urbanisme*, which became an official discipline in that country at the *École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts* in the mid-1950s. To counter this empirical planning state, the geographer and philosopher, Gaston Bachelard, published in 1956, *The Poetics of Space*. In that text, much liked Beckett, Bachelard stressed the dialectical relationship between imagination and realism. A house, for Bachelard, was far more than a simple engineering or design problem, it was a place to house memory and a space to protect the imagination; it became the site for daydreaming. Bachelard too, wrote about radio. In his essay, 'Radio and Reverie', he sees in broadcasting a world in which 'everyone can hear everyone else, and we can all listen in peace'.[60] Beckett held copies of Bachelard's texts in his library.[61] He may have seen in him an ally in critiquing positivism and emphasising the role of perception and imagination, even irrationality, within the world of engineering and technology.

Beckett, in part to solve writer's block and in part to experiment with a different technology, switches to radio and to the medium of the air. The concept of the wave is at the core of radio. A radio wave is a form of energy that is broadcast from a singular point, and, through a series of relays, spreads out in every direction. Once a wave is let loose it exists independently of the original output. The energy appears, fades, but never completely disappears: materiality combines with ghostliness. Waves are guided, but they cross paths, form counter currents, crash upon a distant shore, their origins never

truly known. Beckett's radio waves are hard to discern; they require what Adorno loved: careful listening. Faint and barely audible at times, his radio plays exist at the moment when radio and its listener, the modern subject, were caught between the radio propaganda of the 1930s and '40s and the move to commercialism, pop, jingles, advertisements, and political talk. Beckett also liked the collective technical side of radio. The BBC sound engineers with whom he worked in the 1950s were also developing *Doctor Who*, with its uncanny soundtrack rooted in the tradition of *musique concrète* – music without a source. Radio could distort the familiar and bring the intimate into technical reproduction. For Beckett, there was something democratic about radio, or rather he wished to test radio to see its potential to create free, challenging listening. Radio waves also resist national borders. *All That Fall* is attuned to Irish dialect and provincialism, yet radio is also cosmopolitan in its ability to be received by anyone with a receiver. Beckett sought, therefore, to counter the official national voice, as represented by Radio France or the BBC, with a dislocated, elusive voice. Unlike the streamlining of traffic that is enveloping modern cities, encircling his home, and as represented by Le Périphérique, radio resists easy channelling (this was the peak time of pirate radio), is capable of being captured by anyone with a receiver, and spreads out evenly across the landscape. A last gasp of modernism? A foreshadowing of regional (or international) listening? A critique of the critique that silence must be filled, that we must always tune in, be attuned? Beckett's radio no doubt speaks to all these issues, but what most drives his engagement with the medium is its uncanny spatiality. Beckett's radio lies as much in media theory and in urban history as in the ether.

To conclude, I've attempted to suggest three things about Beckett's radio. First, his interest in the location of the voice (be it in narrative, in morality, in politics, or in the individual) drew him to radio. Voice and radio are both spatial problems. Where does one find one's voice? The location of radio, too, is curious. Is it in our heads, in subjective listening, or in the atmosphere – always on the air, always available? These spatial aspects of the medium appealed to his sense of mystery and ideological uncertainty. Second, I wish to raise the idea that voice is a problem that gets theorised in radio, and that the space of radio, as John Mowitt argues, is in theory as much as anywhere else. Critical theory must always contend with voice, for voice is that which is consistently immediate and immediately gone. Voice suggests presence and truth, but it also signifies slippery tone and absence. How we theorise radio, therefore, shapes how we read Beckett. Third,

neither theory nor literature exists in a vacuum. Understanding the objects called voice and radio requires geography. There can neither be voice nor radio outside of space. Beckett famously made Paris his home, and Paris was changing with speed. Voice, radio, theory: none can be abstracted from waves of urban and spatial change.

Notes

1. I would like to thank my colleagues, especially Ryan Holifield and Alison Donnelly, in the Geography Department at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, who invited me to read a version of this paper in their colloquia series.
2. Frank Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of Ulysses* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1960), pp. 67–8. '"I want", said Joyce, as we were walking down the Universitätsträsse, "to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city suddenly one day disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book"'.
3. Theodor Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', in *Notes to Literature, Volume 1* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 237–70 (pp. 241, 243).
4. Andrew Thacker's *Moving Through Modernity: Space and Geography in Modernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009) focuses on Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, E.M. Forster, and Jean Rhys, but it doesn't mention Beckett. The great combiner of urbanism and literature is Marshall Berman. His *Modernism in the Streets* (London: Verso Books, 2017) homes in on Franz Kakfa, Orhan Pahuk, Isaac Babel and others, but makes no reference to Beckett. *Joyce, Benjamin, and Magical Urbanism* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), edited by Enda Duffy and Maurizia Boscagli, pairs the two most commonly cited urban modernists.
5. Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 2011), 1.
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8. Court Theatre, < https://www.courttheatre.org/season-tickets/2014–2015-season/waiting-for-godot/ > [accessed 4 November 2021].
9. Samuel Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape*, in *The Collected Shorter Plays* (New York: Grove Press, 1984), pp. 53–65 (p. 56).
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13. Everett Frost, 'Fundamental Sounds: Recording Samuel Beckett's Radio Plays', *Theatre Journal*, 43.3 (1991): 361–76 (p. 366).
14. Marjorie Perloff, < http://writing.upenn.edu/epc/authors/perloff/beckett.html > [accessed 8 November 2021].
15. Emile Morin, 'Beckett's Speaking Machines: Sound, Radiophonics and the Acousmatics', *Modernism/modernity*, 21.1 (2014): 1–24 (p. 19).
16. David Addyman, Matthew Feldman, Eric Tonning (eds), *Samuel Beckett and the BBC Radio: A Reassessment* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).
17. Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations* (Abingdon, England: Routledge, 2001).
18. Jacques Derrida, *Voice and Phenomenon* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2010), p. 22.

19. Ibid., p. 65.
20. Ibid., p. 75.
21. Ibid., p. 65.
22. Ibid., p. 27.
23. No complete history of Le Périphérique exists in book form in English. Numerous articles on the development of 'les banlieues' reference its development and ideology. See, for example, Marc Angélil and Cary Siress, 'The Paris Banlieue: Peripheries of Inequity', *Journal of International Affairs*, 65. 2 (2012): 57–67, or Ernesto Castaneda, 'Banlieue', in *The Encyclopedia of Urban Studies*, ed. by Ray Huthison (Sage Oaks: Sage Publications, 2016), pp. 55–7. In French, the collective known as Tomato Architectes have published *Paris: La Ville du Périphérique* (Paris: Le Moniteur, 2003), a collection of essays on many facets of Le Périphérique, from its location to the public sculptures that exist along its route. Eric Hazard references many facts and details about the ring road in *The Invention of Paris* (New York: Verso, 2011).
24. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (London: Penguin Classics, 2014), p. 61.
25. Samuel Beckett, *Samuel Beckett: The Grove Centenary Edition, Volume II, Novels* (New York: Grove Press, 2009), p. 285.
26. Steven Connor, *Beckett, Modernism, and the Material Imagination* (Cambridge, UK; Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 65.
27. Samuel Beckett, *Embers*, in *Samuel Beckett: The Grove Centenary Edition, Volume III, Dramatic Works* (New York: Grove Press, 2009), pp. 195–213.
28. Frantz Fanon, 'This Is the Voice of Algeria', in *A Dying Colonialism* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), pp. 69–97.
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30. Beckett, *Cascando*, in *Samuel Beckett: The Grove Centenary Edition, Volume III, Dramatic Works* (New York: Grove Press, 2009), pp. 341–53.
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32. Beckett, *All That Fall*, p. 158.
33. Samuel Beckett, *Rough for Radio II*, in *Samuel Beckett: The Grove Centenary Edition, Volume III, Dramatic Works* (New York: Grove Press, 2009), pp. 331–7.
34. Samuel Beckett, 'The Capital of Ruins', in *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Short Prose, 1929–1989* (New York: Grove Press, 1995), pp. 275–9.
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39. Ibid., p. 41.
40. Theodor Adorno, 'The Radio Voice', in *Current of Music* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2009), pp. 345–92.
41. Ibid., p. 371.
42. Samuel Beckett, *Company*, in *Samuel Beckett: The Grove Centenary Edition, Volume IV, Poems, Short Fiction, Criticism* (New York: Grove Press, 2009), pp. 427–50.
43. Zilliacus, pp. 169–70.

44. Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Routledge, 2015).
45. Mark Nixon, *Beckett's German Diaries, 1936–1937* (London: Continuum, 2011), p. 85.
46. Fanon, p. 82.
47. Ibid., p. 87.
48. Ibid., p. 58.
49. Ibid., p. 89.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid., p. 83.
52. Ibid., p. 87.
53. Ibid., p. 94.
54. John Mowitt, 'Stations of Exception', in *Radio: Essays in Bad Reception* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), pp. 77–104.
55. Graham Robb, 'Périphérique', in *Parisians: An Adventure History of Paris* (New York: Norton, 2010), pp. 381–403.
56. Ibid., p. 398.
57. Ibid., 397.
58. James Cannon, *The Paris Zone: A Cultural History, 1840–1944* (London: Routledge, 2015).
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