

## Pulse & Polarity: The Vibrational Epistemology of Fuller and Emerson

The American Transcendentalists lived--and we live--in a vibrating world. Thoreau's interest in the vibrating "telegraph harp," Fuller's use of magnetic treatments for her spine, and Emerson's theory of polarity are well known examples of nineteenth-century interest in invisible energies (e.g. electricity, mesmerism, magnetism) and mysticism. Given this interest, *sonic* vibrations were not lost on the American Transcendentalists. Although we have witnessed a recent increase in Sound Studies scholarship on Thoreau, Sound Studies scholars have yet to take up the subject of Transcendentalism. More specifically, Fuller's music criticism and Emerson's references to sound in his philosophy have been neglected by Sound Studies scholars. By arguing for what I am calling Fuller's and Emerson's "vibrational epistemology," this paper begins to rectify this oversight, directly engaging with Transcendentalism in a Sound Studies analysis.

In a *Sound Studies* article on "Thoreau's Ear," Jeff Todd Titon asserts, "Sounds vibrate living beings into a way of knowing that proceeds by interconnection, a community of relations: a relational epistemology" (2015, 145). I alter Titon's phrasing slightly to use the term "vibrational epistemology" instead to put emphasis on the vibrations and pulsations that produce sounds. Fuller's vibrational epistemology emerges in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* in reference to woman as "the other chamber of the heart of life" and Emerson's is foundational to one of his most often quoted passages in *Nature* (1836), when "the Universal Being circulates" through him. Sound production provides a medium through which individuals become more self-aware in a vibrating world. It is the body that produces sounds and listens, the mind that contextualizes, and the combination of the two that bring about self-awareness in relation to a particular environment. Discovering one's inner creative power as a pulsing, vibrating being is a central component to Fuller's and Emerson's transcendentalism.

This framework of creative, embodied listening provides a useful tool for understanding how Fuller's transcendentalism flows into her social organization of women. When Fuller finishes *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* with a portrayal of the Over-Soul as "the heart of the world" into which she must beat her "own pulse true," she translates her vibrational epistemology into social activism. Similarly, she later would confide in Emerson that women's minds, once awakened, could not "cease to vibrate." But the self-reliant sound-producer must also adjust to others in a fluctuating soundscape in order to achieve social harmony.

Both Fuller and Emerson encourage finding a balance between the individual pulse of self-reliance and the generative energy of polarity in interdependence in their writings. Emerson's theory of polarity, when considered in musical terms, offers harmony as an ongoing activity between contrasting individuals who produce a creative third possibility that cannot be achieved alone. Difference is not always dissonant but often generative and beautiful. This paper splits time equally between Fuller's and Emerson's vibrational epistemologies and, by reading the two together, demonstrates what Transcendentalism has to offer Sound Studies and what Sound Studies has to offer the study of Transcendentalism.