

Staging the Sounds of a Nation: The Poetic Soundscapes of the USA

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“What’s that sound coming in from the side there?”

“Which side?”

“The left.”

“You mean that sound that sounds like the cutting edge of life? That sounds like polar bears crossing Arctic ice pans? That sounds like a herd of musk ox in full flight? That sounds like male walruses diving to the bottom of the sea? That sounds like fumaroles smoking on the slopes of Mt. Katmai? That sounds like the wild turkey walking through the deep, soft forest? That sounds like beavers chewing trees in an Appalachian marsh? That sounds like an oyster fungus growing on an aspen trunk? That sounds like a mule deer wandering a montane of the Sierra Nevada? That sounds like prairie dogs kissing? That sounds like witch grass tumbling or a river meandering? That sounds like manatees munching seaweed at Cape Sable? That sounds like coatimundis moving in packs across the face of Arkansas? That sounds like –”

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Donald Barthelme, "The King of Jazz" (1977)

Donald Barthelme's visual account of the sounds coming from Hokie Mokie's trombone in "The King of Jazz" identifies Mokie's distinctive style – the real epiphanic glow of "those few but perfectly selected notes" (1977: 31) – with an evocative inventory of North American wildlife and landscapes that his fictional Japanese rival, Hideo Yamaguchi, could never convey with his instrument. According to David Yaffe, Barthelme's parodic narrative demonstrates the folly of jazz writing. His point is that even if collage may be considered the dominant compositional principle of twentieth century art, "these descriptions, even when patched together, do not add up to much [...] Hokie Mokie might be blowing his trombone with superb virtuosity, but the act of matching it to language is, to paraphrase Barthelme, about as elegant as a herd of musk ox in full flight" (2005: 2). The attempt to use verbal language to describe sounds or music may be doomed to failure; and yet, as John Barth remarked in his admiring obituary of the minimalist Barthelme, the fact that he did not waste any words made such occasional lyric flights "all the more exhilarating" (1989: 9). Truly, the above quotation from "The King of Jazz" is a very remarkable instance of what Jonathan Sterne has termed "sonic imagination," a synaesthetic neologism which is "about sound but occupies an ambiguous position between sound culture and a space of contemplation outside it" (2012: 5). The fact is that, within the intellectual framework of the rising field of sound studies, Barthelme's short story would have been valued differently, hence the urgency to critically continue to open up a sonic space lest key American sounds continue to go unheard.

The international conference *Staging American Sounds* (9th and 10th May, 2013) at UCM was organized by the undersigned to provide the ideal venue for scholars from the United States and Europe to discuss the particularities of American sounds from an interdisciplinary point of view. This special issue of *Complutense Journal of English Studies* collects the best papers from that conference, whose aim was precisely to keep re-thinking sound and its role within cultures as a response to our continuously changing sonic worlds.

It may be worth simply recalling the radical redefinition undergone by music in the twentieth century, when in the 1970s Murray Schafer coined the influential term "soundscape" and started the *World Soundscape Project* educational and research group at Simon Fraser University. Since then, "the interdisciplinary ferment in the human sciences that takes sound as its analytical point of departure or arrival" (Sterne 2012: 5) has grown at a fast pace. Poignantly, this approach also becomes an unexpected archaeological tool for the reconsideration of the American cultural past. The ephemerality of sounds makes this exploration a particularly fascinating – not to say phantasmagoric – project, which also unveils sonic "records" in material sources not conventionally tested for sound. Take *space*, as in the relation of space and the

particular echoes they produce, say, the production and reception of past voices in a church sermon or religious chants; but also *writing*, not only as a recorder of voice and vocal performance, but also as a producer of its own sounds as Garrett Stewart has conceptualized with the term “phonotext” (Stewart 1990).

Can writing, after all, be put totally at the service of a distinct American voice? Does writing have an accent? On a visit to America in 1904-1905, Henry James thought American pronunciation a travesty of what English should sound like, and thus objecting to the attempts of USA to standardize its own utterance (through such efforts as the Simplified Spelling Movement), a debate which Joshua L. Miller has documented so well in *Accented America* (2011). Speech, James thought, should respond to a tone-standard set by phonemes on the page, not the other way round; that is, by transcribing utterances as vocal noises. James did not disdain speech but rather thought of it as the performance of a written script; much to his compatriots’ discontent, he favoured *aural*, not *oral* cultures. For her part, in *Tender Buttons* (1914), Gertrude Stein conceptualized “A Sound” instead as an: “Elephant beaten with candy and little pops and chews all bolts and reckless rats, this is this” (2014: 28). Altering canonical representation and experimenting with new compositional arrangements and phonemic play, she was forcing her readers to reconsider how language constructs the world. Whether one finds James or Stein the more convincing, such modernist debates were at the turn of the twentieth century already implying the urgent need to rethink the cultural location of poetic sound.

Many are the poets and fiction writers of the United States that have contributed as “earwitnesses” to the world surrounding them and have transformed our perception of what sound is. Awareness of the sounds of nature and of the everyday life proved to be a deeply “American way” of perceiving and addressing sonic phenomena in the twentieth century. Sam Shepard, for instance, is among the most insightful auditors to the beats and cadences of the American soundscape. Beyond the frenzied rock duel of Hoss and Crow in *The Tooth of Crime* (1972), or the translation of the compositional structures of jazz improvisation in *Suicide in B-Flat* (1976), in “Rhythm,” a short story included in *Hawk Moon*, the author wonders how everything would be simpler if life could be sung to the standard of rock and roll progression. The writer is haunted by the thought that the rhythms of any everyday activity are, in fact, a far more sophisticated pattern of sound than any of the best drum solos ever heard. Who can call himself a drummer being surrounded by

dog claws clicking on hard-wood floors. Clocks. Piston rhythms. Dripping faucets. Tin hitting tin in the wind. Water slapping rocks. Flesh slapping flesh. Boxing rhythms. Racing rhythms. Rushing brooks. Radio static buzz in a car when the engine is the dictator. Directional turnsignal blinkers. Off and on neon signs. Blinking yellow arrows. Water pumps. Refrigerator hums? (Shepard 1973: 63)

This and other instances seem to raise awareness of an inherent beauty to be found in the soundscape of the world through their mastery in imparting “the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known” (Shklovsky 1965: 12), as Shklovsky defined “defamiliarisation” in 1917. They seem, in other words, to be foregrounding the necessary mediation of man in creating an aural culture; for, as Schaffer posed in *The Soundscape*, an essential question to be addressed is whether the soundscape of the world is “an indeterminate composition over which we have no control, or are we its composers and performers, responsible for giving it form and beauty” (1994: 5). How could, then, America ever take control over its own (sonic) destiny?

The daring question posed to a group of international scholars specialized in the field of American Studies was whether a nation can be heard through its literature, through its history, its poetry, its music; and if so, what sounds, if any, are distinctively American? Can we become, even through senses other than our ears, auditors to a culture? And how have American artists shaped and staged a sonic American imagination?

We believe that a deeper understanding of the culture of the United States is enabled by the acoustic approach we are gesturing toward. The following collection of interdisciplinary essays aims at answering these and related questions from an international transatlantic perspective and inscribing itself within the “sonic turn” that, like its pictorial predecessor articulated by W. J. T. Mitchell in 1994, is vibrantly making its claim in cultural and literary studies in the twenty-first century – as evinced by *American Quarterly*’s special issue, “Sound Clash: Listening to American Studies,” edited by Kara Keeling and Josh Kun in 2011, with which we align our own exploratory effort. As Jim Drobnick also points out in *Aural Cultures*: to postulate a sonic turn “is more than just a matter of adroitly exchanging one trope, one sense of modality, for another. Sound bears a number of distinctive qualities, not only a temporal, dissipative dimension, but also an inherent performative and a social orientation” (2004: 10). So it may be that a nation proclaims itself most glaringly by staging its sounds, and doing so in the widest theatrical sense.

The themes covered by the authors in this collection include echoes in space, the sound of silence, voices and noises, the sounds of reading, the transformation of texts into scripts, the politics of sounding and the need of voicing the silence of the oppressed, as well as the musical representation of a nation through its hymns and songs chants; this is an acoustic scenario that reveals the politics of sound as class, gender, and ethnicity, but also as a geographic, spatial and historical marker.

The articles opening this special issue of *Complutense Journal of English Studies* address the linguistic wealth of the United States through a historical and social perspective. **Nathalie Dessens** takes us into a fascinating historical journey to the streets of antebellum New Orleans to explore the sounds of a city recurrently described as the Babel of the South by newcomers and visitors struck by its noises

and sounds. Dessens looks at the ethnic diversity of the former colonial city, the uncommon coexistence in public spaces of a varied population and, above all, to the unique linguistic wealth of nineteenth century New Orleans to call into question, precisely, the image of Babel, which implies both diversity and impossible communication. What seemed to most of the travelers a noisy cluster of voices unable to communicate and understand each other, was most probably “a more productive diversity which, eventually, gave the city a very specific voice, the voice of New Orleans, and yet, definitely one of the voices of the United States.” Whereas public records as those quoted by Professor Dessens can provide the historian with eloquent proof for the richness of the plurilingual sounds to be found in American cities, it is equally true that a myriad singular human voices making up that richness of American diversity were lost or silenced for centuries.

In those situations where historiography fails to offer models against which lived experience can be reconstructed, theatre – **Valerie Joyce** suggests – can become the means “to explore, teach, and ultimately hear history through performance” and create thus living historiography. Joyce is a theatre historian, scholar, director and dramaturg. In her article she gives an account of the union of artistry and scholarship that turned her into a playwright, tracing the transformation of archival texts into a performance script she has entitled *(Dis)Embodied Voices* – a series of performance monologues traversing two hundred years of African American women’s history before Emancipation. Focusing on three characters, Sarah, Lucinda and Mary, the author recalls the challenges she encountered as a researcher in piecing together a woman’s life when the remaining absence is greater than the remaining presence; she raises other significant problems, for instance, those posed by the standardization process undergone by most of the recordings and texts in crucial records such as those of the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP) archives.

The issue of the standardization of language, or rather, the prejudice with regard to the non-standard use of the American English is again taken up in **Patrícia Alves Lobo’s** contribution, who explores linguistic hybridism in Chicana culture through a reading of Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987). Alves Lobo explores how in the twenty-first century, and twenty-eight years after the publication of Anzaldúa’s seminal book, American society still seems to be unprepared (or unwilling) to hear the voices of Chicanas, to understand and accept the linguistic hybridism of Chicanas mixing English, Spanish, Spanglish and Nahuatl as “a creative and dynamic manner of expression, springing from the experience of living in the interstices between two cultures and which presents itself as a reflection of that very reality.”

The following three essays in this collection predominantly focus on American musical history and explore the link between ethnic voices and songs. **Anne Stefani** considers the impact of Freedom Songs as vehicles for protest in the 1960s. She emphasizes that, beyond their most obvious function, that is, to mobilize and cement

collective participation in the various demonstrations and actions of nonviolent resistance to segregation, Freedom Songs had a crucial transforming power over the individuals who sang them. Stefani argues that in the context of the southern Freedom Movement, “singing became an existential experience, a second birth through which African Americans grew into a new awareness of their culture and constructed a new identity, not only for themselves but also for their people.” In “To the Beat of their Own Drum: Women in Salsa,” **Delia Poey** investigates another uniquely American sound, Salsa, an artistic form centered on the experience of migration, cultural contact and transformation, and remapped affiliations. “There are ongoing discussions among scholars as well as performers regarding Salsa’s influences and roots,” Poey reminds us in the opening of her essay, but “the one point of consensus is that New York City is its birthplace.” **Claude Chastagner** explores the interactions between the musical space and the social space that *Tejanos* currently occupy on the American stage. What are musical trends telling us about the evolution of the community? First, Chastagner examines the changes occurring within the *Tejano* community and in its relationship with the Anglo environment, before dealing with the new identity and cultural processes suggested by these new sounds. Taking the work of Michael Ramos, founder and leader of Charanga Cakewalk, as his case study, Chastagner discusses the impact of staging subversive sounds that dislocate the dominant ones.

The sonic considerations of the three final essays are more theoretical, as they turn to the question of writing as acoustic mediation. **Dídac Llorens** ties the musical genre of opera to the acoustic exploration of a literary work. Llorens argues that in *The Turn of the Screw*, Henry James evidences an interest in the physical qualities of characters’ speech and recurrently resorts to musical or performative imagery, but his text remains crucially silent about the ghosts; as an allegory, perhaps, of Victorian sexual taboos. Benjamin Britten’s opera adaptation is faithful to James’ text, yet gives voice to those ghosts who will not go unheard on the stage. **Eulalia Piñero Gil** revisits Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, a key text in US women’s writing, whose sensorial richness had surprisingly been ignored by critics. As Piñero Gil argues, music in this novel becomes a powerful *leitmotif* that evokes transformation, awareness and initiation. Significantly, this essay explores how Kate Chopin creates in *The Awakening* an enduring artistic and sensorial synaesthesia, through the extensive use of music, in which one type of sensation triggers another sensorial response in a different perceptual domain. In this way, Piñero Gil aptly argues, music is employed to evoke and blend not only images in Edna’s mind, but all types of physical and emotional feelings that contribute in a decisive way to the protagonist’s transcendental metamorphosis. Finally, **María Goicoechea and Víctor Salceda** offer a comprehensive and fascinating survey of sound poetry into the digital age as a telling chapter of American history. The authors of this essay premise their approach to sound as the medium of Marshall McLuhan’s message. Such adverse cultural

diagnosis is the object of artists which make it their goal thus to flaunt, ironically and creatively, the sounds of writing.

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