

Sonophilia / Sonophobia : sonic others in the poetry of Edward Sapir

Autor(en): **Reichel, A. Elisabeth**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature**

Band (Jahr): **32 (2015)**

PDF erstellt am: **05.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-583875>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Inhalten der Zeitschriften. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern.

Die auf der Plattform e-periodica veröffentlichten Dokumente stehen für nicht-kommerzielle Zwecke in Lehre und Forschung sowie für die private Nutzung frei zur Verfügung. Einzelne Dateien oder Ausdrucke aus diesem Angebot können zusammen mit diesen Nutzungsbedingungen und den korrekten Herkunftsbezeichnungen weitergegeben werden.

Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. Die systematische Speicherung von Teilen des elektronischen Angebots auf anderen Servern bedarf ebenfalls des schriftlichen Einverständnisses der Rechteinhaber.

Haftungsausschluss

Alle Angaben erfolgen ohne Gewähr für Vollständigkeit oder Richtigkeit. Es wird keine Haftung übernommen für Schäden durch die Verwendung von Informationen aus diesem Online-Angebot oder durch das Fehlen von Informationen. Dies gilt auch für Inhalte Dritter, die über dieses Angebot zugänglich sind.

Sonophilia / Sonophobia: Sonic Others in the Poetry of Edward Sapir

A. Elisabeth Reichel

One of the key findings in early visual culture studies is a profound ambivalence toward images, which is intricately tied up with hegemonic conceptions of cultural, racial, and sexual Others. Starting from W. J. T. Mitchell's diagnosis of iconophilia and iconophobia for visual culture, I argue that recent sound studies yield parallel conclusions with regard to sonic culture, as scholars such as Jonathan Sterne point to a long tradition of writing on sound that is also characterized by attraction to and repulsion of media and sign systems other than written language. On the basis of a theoretical conception of what I term *sonophilia* and *sonophobia*, then, this essay asserts that it is precisely the ambivalence toward sound that is at the center of the poetry of anthropologist and linguist Edward Sapir. In their treatment of auditory sense perceptions as the Other of written language, Sapir's poems "Music" and "Zuni" attest to the fact that not only images but notions of sound, too, are shaped by ideological associations embedded in semiotic and sensory oppositions.

I

In his seminal *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, W. J. T. Mitchell sets out to examine "the way in which differences between the arts are instituted by figures – figures of difference, of discrimination, of judgment":

In suggesting that these judicious discriminations are figurative I do not mean to assert that they are simply false, illusory, or without efficacy. On the

Literature, Ethics, Morality: American Studies Perspectives. SPELL: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature 32. Ed. Ridvan Askin and Philipp Schweighauser. Tübingen: Narr, 2015. 215-229.

contrary, I want to suggest that they are powerful distinctions that effect the way the arts are practiced and understood. [. . .] The differences [. . .] are riddled with all the antithetical values the culture wants to embrace or repudiate: the *paragone* or debate of poetry and painting is never just a contest between two kinds of signs, but a struggle between body and soul, world and mind, nature and culture. (49)

While firmly rejecting simplistic claims of a difference *in essence* between poetry and painting, Mitchell acknowledges that “there are always a number of differences in effect in a culture which allow it to sort out the distinctive qualities of its ensemble of signs and symbols” (49). Crucially, though, these “literally false” but “figuratively true” distinctions are fraught with value judgments derived from culturally prevalent dichotomies such as body/soul, world/mind, nature/culture. Through a discourse analysis of Nelson Goodman’s, Ernst Gombrich’s, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s, and Edmund Burke’s writing on images, Mitchell explores the tendency in visual culture to construe the image as an Other¹ which is associated with nature (Gombrich); space and stasis (Lessing); irrationality, the feminine, and the primitive (Burke), a key difference being whether this association is celebrated, indicating “iconophilia,” or seen as a threat, leading to “iconophobia” (3, 151 *passim*). Clearly an iconophobe in this sense, Lessing asserts that to make use of painterly techniques as a poet is “as if a man, with the power and privilege of speech, were to employ the signs which the mutes in a Turkish seraglio had invented to supply the want of a voice” (68). “The tongue, of course, was not the only organ that the mutes in the Turkish seraglio were missing” (155), Mitchell comments pointedly in his essay “Ekphrasis and the Other,” exposing a twofold gesture that associates images with both cultural and sexual Others. Conversely, written and spoken words – the very medium Lessing uses – emerge from this proc-

¹ This term, however, is less emphatically used in *Iconology* and never marked by capitalization. *Other* is prominent in this essay for two reasons: It offers a convenient shorthand for Mitchell’s core observation that differentiations between one medium and another always come with ideological baggage and “seem[] inevitably to fall back into prior questions of value and interest that could only be answered in historical terms” (*Iconology* 3). Secondly, by lending itself easily to definite and indefinite singular, plural, and gerund forms, the term *Other* is also able to capture the flexibility and contingency of these processes of differentiation and valuation, which is of great value to this essay’s line of argument. Even more, in its capitalized form, the term hints at the paradox that, despite the large number of Others and Otherings, the respective object of discrimination is never treated as *one among others* but as *the Other* in a dyadic relationship between the generic Self and its Other.

ess as the supreme sign system, suitable to a central European man endowed with heterosexual prowess.

Ekphrasis, defined as “the verbal representation of visual representation” (Heffernan 3; qtd. in Mitchell, “Ekphrasis” 152), in fact serves as a key platform for Mitchell, as he turns from describing to explaining processes of medial Othering. For “[t]he answer,” he notes, “lies in the network of ideological associations embedded in the semiotic, sensory, and metaphysical oppositions that ekphrasis is supposed to overcome”:

These oppositions [. . .] are neither stable nor scientific [. . .]. They are best understood as [. . .] allegories of power and value disguised as a neutral metalanguage. Their engagement with relations of otherness or alterity is, of course, not determined systematically or a priori, but in specific contexts of pragmatic application. The “otherness” of visual representation from the standpoint of textuality may be anything from a professional competition (the *paragone* of poet and painter) to a relation of political, disciplinary, or cultural domination in which the “self” is understood to be an active, speaking, seeing subject, while the “other” is projected as a passive, seen, and (usually) silent object. (“Ekphrasis” 156-57)

Representations of images coincide with representations of cultural and sexual Others, then, because the same relations of domination that inform the treatment of the latter are projected, in pragmatic contexts, onto “differences between visual and verbal media at the level of sign-types, forms, materials of representation, and institutional traditions” (“Ekphrasis” 161). That images as well as cultural and sexual Others have been frequently construed as particularly natural, for instance, is neither a mere coincidence nor a necessary consequence of essential characteristics but the product of historically and culturally specific conditions that need these Others to be passive, silent, and exploitable objects. Iconophilia and iconophobia, Mitchell shows, express anxieties about merging with an inferiorized Other.

On the basis of this visual culture studies account of how the problematics of gender and cultural relations come to manifest themselves in dominant notions of the image, I argue that the field of sound studies, despite having emerged in a climate of shifting emphasis from ideological concerns to material aspects of meaning production, points to an entwinement of discourses of Otherness and media conceptions as well. The result of the complex interplay of cultural alterity and medial alterity in this case amounts to an ambivalence between what I term *sonophilia*, the fascination with the Otherness of sound and auditory perception, and *sonophobia*, the rejection of sound and auditory perception as a threat

because of their presumed Otherness. To substantiate these claims, I draw on Jonathan Sterne, whose definition of sound studies as a field that interrogates any preconceived knowledge about sound for its cultural and historical functions, parallels Mitchell's early understanding of the epistemological and political potential of visual culture studies.

The third part of this essay analyzes Edward Sapir's poetry. Sapir (1884-1939), a student of Franz Boas at Columbia University and the mentor of Benjamin Lee Whorf at Yale, played a central role in both the formation of cultural anthropology and the early development of linguistic anthropology. What is far less known is that he is also the author of over two hundred poems, a large number of which were published in such renowned magazines as *Poetry*, *The Dial*, *The Nation*, and *The New Republic*. Focusing on two poems out of an oeuvre that is characterized by a sustained interest in sonic phenomena, auditory perception, and musico-literary intermediality, I probe the dynamics of an ambivalent relationship toward sound. Whereas "Music" (1925) thematizes and imitates the effects of a symphony orchestra's musical sound on its listeners, the poem "Zuni" (1926) stages a confrontation with the sounds of another, "primitive" culture. My analysis shows that the two poems represent two different strategies for "a man, with the power and privilege of speech" (Lessing 68), of how to deal with sounds, the "semiotic 'others,' those rival, alien modes of representation" (Mitchell, "Ekphrasis" 156): appropriation and domestication on the one side and rigorous exclusion on the other.

II

While in the early 2000s studies of *sonic culture* and *auditory culture* often covered roughly the same area of inquiry, the name *sound studies* has recently established itself, with editors now using it self-confidently to entitle large anthologies such as Sterne's *The Sound Studies Reader* (2012), Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld's *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies* (2012), and Michael Bull's *Sound Studies* (2013). Within this "interdisciplinary ferment in the human sciences that takes sound as its analytical point of departure or arrival" (Sterne, "Sonic Imaginations" 2), Sterne's work is part of an extensive branch that explores the development of hearing cultures and the history of audio technology. It is grounded on the premise that "there is no knowledge of sound that comes from outside culture" (6) and that, "[b]y analyzing both sonic practices and the discourses and institutions that describe them, it [the field of sound

studies] redescribes what sound does in the human world, and what humans do in the sonic world” (2). Reviewing recent writing on sound, Sterne compiles a list of sensory oppositions that are ritually cited to idealize sound, while denigrating vision and, by extension, written language:

- hearing is spherical, vision is directional;
- hearing immerses its subject, vision offers a perspective;
- sounds come to us, but vision travels to its object;
- hearing is concerned with interiors, vision is concerned with surfaces;
- hearing involves physical contact with the outside world, vision requires distance from it;
- hearing places us inside an event, seeing gives us a perspective on the event;
- hearing tends toward subjectivity, vision tends toward objectivity;
- hearing brings us into the living world, sight moves us toward atrophy and death;
- hearing is about affect, vision is about intellect;
- hearing is a primarily temporal sense, vision is a primarily spatial sense;
- hearing is a sense that immerses us in the world, vision is a sense that removes us from it. (*The Audible Past* 15)

Sterne calls this list “the audiovisual litany” because he sees it as being clearly derived from Christian dogma: It is a restatement of the spirit/letter distinction, with the spirit being living and life-giving, leading to salvation, and the letter being dead and inert, leading to damnation. Since auditory perception is associated with the former and thought to contribute to the soul’s salvation, it holds an elevated position (*The Audible Past* 15-16).² Sterne thus traces an often-cited set of seemingly innocent sensory oppositions back to a specific context of pragmatic application, in which they were imbued with meanings and values to reinforce the preeminence of Christian spiritualism.

In light of Mitchell’s findings, though, it also seems worth asking whether, in a different pragmatic context, this contingent process might not evoke sonophobic sensations, that is, the repudiation of sound precisely because of its immersiveness, directionlessness, physical immediacy, and emotional intimacy. In fact, Sterne’s reading of this list as sonophilic serves a political function, too, namely to put in their proper place the large number of scholars who at the end of the twentieth cen-

² For a more comprehensive account of the Christian spiritualist origins of the audiovisual litany, see Sterne’s “The Theology of Sound.”

ture felt the need to “salvage” sound.³ Sterne’s critique is firstly targeted at Walter J. Ong and his divide between oral culture and modern, literate culture, in support of which the audiovisual litany is cited as evidence for a distinctly alienating disposition of literate society.⁴ Yet one only needs to shift the focus slightly, from Ong to the second major proponent of the orality/literacy divide, Marshall McLuhan, to find confirmation that oral society, characterized by the predominance of hearing and its supposed immersive, directionless, physical, and affective nature, can just as well become a site of fear and terror: For McLuhan, “[t]error is the normal state of any oral society, for in it everything affects everything all the time” (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 32). “Until WRITING was invented,” he declares elsewhere, “we lived in acoustic space, where the Eskimo now lives: boundless, directionless, horizonless, the dark in the mind, the world of emotion, primordial intuition, terror” (“Five Fingers” 207). Again, ambivalences toward Others are reproduced while referring to medial and sensory oppositions. Note that McLuhan’s demarcation of a terrifying “boundless, directionless, horizonless” space of orality comes with cultural discrimination and assigns cultural Others, such as “the Eskimo,” to a realm that “we” inhabited until progress took place. Thus, not only sound and auditory perception are placed in a prior stage of human development but also people who are thought to “still” live in “acoustic space.” In other words, while defining orality as the preliterate stage in the evolution of human society, theorists of the orality/literacy dyad move spaces that they mark as “oral” into temporal antecedence and, in the process, turn their inhabitants into primordial Others. As Johannes Fabian has shown in *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, such a fabrication of temporal differences out of spatial distinctions is a practice commonly used in the social sciences

³ The field of sound studies has certainly gained much momentum from scholars deploring the fact that “the epistemological status of hearing has come a poor second to that of vision” (Bull and Back 1). However, this longing for a heightened awareness and appreciation of auditory perception is far from new. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, for instance, it provided impetus to R. Murray Schafer’s World Soundscape Project and acoustic ecology, “the study of the effects of the acoustic environment [. . .] on the physical responses or behavioral characteristics of creatures living within it” (Schafer 271). Since the publication and translation of Michel Chion’s groundbreaking *Audio-Vision*, film scholars have also strongly promoted research into sound, even laying claim to the origins of sound studies as a result (Altman 4).

⁴ This argument from phenomenological characteristics of the visual and auditory sensoria to psychological traits and the generic makeup of different societies is articulated most clearly – and simplistically – in Ong’s study *Orality and Literacy*.

to negate the coeval existence of different cultures and to perpetuate evolutionary racist thinking under such concepts as cultural relativism.

Let me conclude this section by quoting at length a passage from Sterne that captures what is at stake when attention is paid to instances of medial Othering, which require considering cultural and medial alterity together rather than as isolated objects of investigation, to be analyzed in different fields of research:

It is time we left aside antiquated notions of sensation and cultural difference and built a global history and anthropology of communication without a psychosocial, developmental concept such as orality. We must construct new studies of early media and new ethnographies that do not posit the ascendancy of the White, Christian West as the meaning of history. In the process, we must re-read our own historical and anthropological archives, but it is also time that we reach beyond them. (“Theology of Sound” 222)

While this essay is content with re-reading given accounts and does not reach beyond existing archives to generate new media studies and new ethnographies, it is also informed by the belief that such new archives are ultimately necessary. It is further written in the conviction that not only historical and anthropological archives but the annals of literature, too, offer influential accounts and a significant testing ground for modes of sense perception and medial experience.

III

After moving from Mitchell’s diagnosis of iconophilia and iconophobia to Sterne’s audiovisual litany and what I have called *sonophilia* and *sonophobia*, the third part of this paper analyzes Edward Sapir’s poetry, specifically, its representation of sound and sonic media. Take “Music” as an example:

MUSIC

“What is our life?” profoundly gesturing,
 “Let us forget!” they said, unanimous. –
 The strings are the most chastely amorous
 Of dreamers, ’tis the watery flutes that sing
 Of the lily-footed girls, the oboes bring
 The mountain sleep to the voluptuous,
 Romancing horns. Round this oblivious
 Desire drums threaten and the trumpets ring.

Who are these forty gentlemen of toys,
 Graver than dolls, graver than pirate boys?
 Who are these shining gentlemen of brief
 Commotion? What is their intense belief?—
 “Now what is life?” Take then the dream of joys!
 “Let us forget!” Take but the lilt of grief!

At the most general level, the poem portrays an acoustic experience as pure, unadulterated pleasure. Sounds of strings, flutes, oboes, and horns let the poetic persona escape from questions of meaning, offering instead a “dream of joys” and the comforts of oblivion, which even remain untouched as “drums threaten” and “trumpets ring.” The passage from a meaning-centered existence, with its “profound gestur[es]” and weighty concerns, into this untroubled, sonic realm is signaled by a brief exchange of words, in which the question about life’s meaning is answered with a forceful command to let it fall into oblivion. Importantly, “Let us forget!” includes and is directed at the reader as well, who then, from the next line onwards, is presented with a literary text that not only thematizes but also imitates an acoustic experience through “verbal music” (Steven Paul Scher) or, to use Werner Wolf’s framework, “evocation” (“(Inter)mediality”) and “imaginary content analogies” (*The Musicalization of Fiction* passim). By attributing imaginary contents to the sound, for instance, through the metaphorical language of “The strings are the most chastely amorous / Of dreamers” and “the oboes bring / The mountain sleep to the voluptuous, / Romancing horns,” the text tries to evoke the effect that the sonic experience has on the persona in the reader. Because of the accumulation of images of sleep, this effect may be described as a pleasant drowsiness or somnolence, yet the very pervasiveness of the imagery suggests that the failure of descriptive language in the face of it is part of the point. However, only because the poem is unable to render the sonic experience without recourse to figurative language, the “prowess” of written words is by no means diminished. Quite on the contrary, precisely because of their ability to avail themselves of figurative language as well as descriptive language, written words provide a powerful medium that – in the logic of the poem at least – is capable of rendering, and in this way co-opting, the effects of sound despite their resistance to description and “unruliness.” In fact, as it turns out, written language is also able to do so in a very succinct manner, by use of merely three words: As the imaginary content analogies unfold, it becomes clear that “they,” the “unanimous” voices in the second line of the poem, are the “amorous” strings, the “watery flutes,”

the “voluptuous, / Romancing horns,” and so forth, and the command “Let us forget!” a very concise rendering of their overall sound.

Given the binarism between sonophilia and sonophobia that I just outlined in the preceding section, it may be tempting to put this poem in the box with the sonophiles, who are fascinated with the immersiveness and affectiveness of sound while at no point granting it equal status. Yet, crucially, what is depicted here is not sound but music, Western, classical music, to be precise, with “these forty gentlemen of toys, / Graver than dolls, graver than pirate boys” of course forming a typical symphony orchestra with its woodwinds, brass, percussion, and strings sections. While all music is sound, it is important to bear in mind that not all sound is music and that music requires by necessity a structuring of sound. Even John Cage’s most iconoclastic piece, *4’33”*, consists of three movements, during which all instrumental sounds are suppressed by the instruction *tacet* for four minutes and thirty-three seconds sharp.⁵ Further, as thinkers such as Jacques Attali have compellingly shown, music has at all times served political functions, even, and especially, when it was taken to be exempt from processes of meaning construction. It is sound structured to fit the needs of a power system, first of all, its need to establish order and a sense of community by signaling that an integrated society is possible:

Everywhere [in music] codes analyze, mark, restrain, train, repress, and channel the primitive sounds of language, of the body, of tools, of objects, of the relations to self and others. All music, any organization of sounds is then a tool for the creation or consolidation of a community, of a totality. (Attali 6)

If, as Attali argues, music is the appropriation and domestication of sound, symbolizing the totalitarian ideal of a harmonic society in control of its Others, Sapir’s poem and its celebration of classical music cannot be read as sonophilic; for it is the vanquishing and mastering of sound that is celebrated here.⁶

⁵ While the performance of the piece is usually strictly limited to this length of time, the score contains a note by Cage saying that “the work may be performed by any instrumentalist(s) and the movements may last any lengths of time” (20). Almost needless to say, though, only because the lengths of the piece’s three movements are open to variation, this does not mean that *4’33”* permits unstructured sound. The mere fact that the piece and its movements *are* marked by a beginning and an ending implies that each sound (and silence) that occurs during the performance is subject to a temporal regime.

⁶ Note, too, that classical orchestral music, the only kind of music actually featured in Sapir’s poem on “Music,” is often singled out in writing on the politics of music as most

Another strategy to reinforce superiority and control over sound and to assert, as it were, one's position as "a man, with the power and privilege of speech" (Lessing 68), is represented in the poem "Zuni," which stages a direct confrontation with sound outside the realm of Western, classical music. The poem was written to Sapir's peer and friend Ruth Fulton Benedict before she went on a field trip to study the Zuni, a Pueblo culture then considered primitive by anthropologists.

ZUNI

To R.F.B.

I send you this. Through the monotony
 Of mumbling melody, the established fall
 And rise of the slow dreaming ritual,
 Through the dry glitter of the desert sea
 And sharpness of the mesa, keep the flowing
 Of your spirit, in many branching ways!
 Be running mirrors to the colored maze,
 Not pool enchanted nor a water slowing.

Hear on the wing, see in a flash, retreat! –
 Beauty is brightest when the eye is fleet.
 The priests are singing softly on the sand,
 And the four colored points and zenith stand;
 The desert crawls and leaps, the eagle flies.
 Put wax into your ears and close your eyes.

The poem issues a clear warning against more than fleeting exposure to sound. While its persona draws a distinct line between the Zuni and the addressee, circumscribing "the monotony / Of mumbling melody," "the slow dreaming ritual," and "the dry glitter of the desert sea," and setting them off against the vigorous "flowing / Of your spirit, in many branching ways," it attributes to sound the potential to blur this boundary by "enchant[ing]" or "slow[ing]" the spirit's flow. Prolonged exposure, it is assumed, would bring the addressee indistinguishably close to the "softly" singing Zuni priests and the slowly "crawl[ing]" desert, that is, to the side opposed to the dynamism of the creative mind. "Retreat!"

representative of music's oppressive bent. According to R. Murray Schafer, for instance, orchestral music shows "an imperialistic bias" (109), which reached its peak in Wagnerian music, a music that "constantly threatened to drown the singers" and was "designed alternately to thrill, exalt and crush swelling metropolitan audiences" (110). Schafer thus suggests that orchestral music not only consists of "codes [that] analyze, mark, restrain, train, repress, and channel" (Attali 6) certain sounds but also possesses the power to "drown," "crush," and completely annihilate others.

the persona therefore emphatically commands. Only if sensory experience takes place “on the wing” and “in a flash,” and auditory impressions are ultimately excluded, the mind continues to flow “in many branching ways,” as “running mirrors” to the primitive Other, mimetically describing and observing from a distance rather than merging with it.

The protective measure, then, that is proposed in the concluding line of the poem, to “[p]ut wax into your ears,” is inspired by the myth of Odysseus and the Sirens, one of the earliest literary manifestations of sonophobia. Odysseus, as the Homeric tale famously relates, urged his sailors to bind him to the mast and to put wax into their ears so that the Sirens’ song would not seduce them to go astray and shipwreck. Sapir’s “Zuni” as well as this myth presume notions of hearing as immersive, as physically and emotionally intimate and immediate, to treat sound as an existential threat which must be warded off. Even more, they warn against sonophilic sensations, that is, against feeling attracted to sounds and thus being deceived into overlooking their threat. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the spatial setting of the two texts, which in each case juxtaposes “brightest” “[b]eauty” and enticing sensory perceptions with signs of imminent danger. While the singing Zuni priests are encircled by eagles and placed in a desert that “crawls and leaps,” the Sirens in Homer “enchant all with their clear song” while “[a]round them there is a great heap of the bones / of rotting men, and the skin shrivels up around / these bones” (234). Written and spoken words, on the other side, the signs through which both Homer’s myth and Sapir’s poem are commonly perceived, appear as a safeguard against the threat of sound, being instrumental in the attempts of both Odysseus and the persona of “Zuni” to preserve focused, rational thinking in their companions. In this way, sound comes to represent an Other of written and spoken language, which has to be kept at a distance together with the cultural Others who are accused of producing it: the Zuni and the Sirens.⁷

In fact, in one of his many letters to Benedict, Sapir himself comments on “Zuni” and its intertextual reference to Homer: “You see I am

⁷ Jon Elster’s *Ulysses and the Sirens* offers an interesting addendum to my argument here, by focusing on Odysseus’s reaction to the Sirens’ sound, that is, his request to be bound to the mast. Importantly, this act serves as the primal scene for a theory of “imperfect rationality” in Elster’s study. It is thus shown that the action that is able to oppose the sound of the Sirens is directed by rational thought. When connecting this argument, then, to the claim that written and spoken language function as counterforces to the Sirens, too, it can be argued that this is because they are considered to be governed by rationality as well.

warning you against the Desert Siren. It would be terrible to have you come back overpunctuated with Oh and Ah like any well-behaved acolyte of the Santa Fé school” (Sapir, Letter). Although the letter was obviously written in a humorous vein, it testifies to the poem’s underlying notion that auditory perception is particularly susceptible to foreign influences. The sounds of “the Desert Siren” are assumed to be able to turn someone into a “well-behaved acolyte” who serves the priests on what is construed as “the wrong side.” One crucial difference between Sapir’s letter and “Zuni” remains, though: While this side is identified with a locality and a school of writing in the former,⁸ the latter ostracizes a Pueblo people.

IV

By way of conclusion, I want to deliver on the promise of this essay’s title to provide insight into the “sonic Others” in Sapir’s poetry: Firstly, and maybe most commonsensically, these “sonic Others” are the groups of people that are depicted as avid producers of sound, such as the Zuni and the Sirens. Sound, however, as I claim in this essay, appears itself as an Other, which evokes either fascination or fear and is opposed to written language. After all, “Zuni”’s warning against sound comes in written words: “I send you this,” its opening states explicitly, rendering the poem’s mediality as a written, sent, and read text part of its indictment against sound from the outset. Analogies between representations of cultural Others and medial Others are not coincidental but result from the projection of dominant power relations onto basic semiotic and sensory oppositions, which then inform the treatment of different media as well as forms of cultural discrimination. Hence the injunction that children should not be heard – to use Mitchell once again – is transferable from children to women to colonized subjects to images (“Ekphrasis” 162), and to sounds, I would add, unless they have been structured to adhere to Western musical standards. To be as clear as possible, this is *not* to suggest that silencing marginalized groups of people is qualitatively the same as suppressing the sonic or the iconic. To be sure, it is not. My point is rather an interrelatedness between the two, which generates practices of Othering that feed back into each other: With

⁸ The reference to the “Santa Fé school” remains unclear in Sapir’s letter. As one of several possible interpretations, it can be read as alluding to Susan Shelby Magoffin’s influential diary *Down the Santa Fe Trail*, in which Magoffin narrates – in a style punctuated with “Oh” and “Ah” – her travels on the Santa Fe Trail in the late 1860s.

sound itself constructed as alien and threatening, shutting out and shutting up the oppressed becomes an even more urgent task and absolute silence of Others a social ideal.

References

- Altman, Rick. "Sound Studies: A Field Whose Time Has Come." *Iris* 27 (1999): 3-4.
- Attali, Jacques. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985.
- Bull, Michael, ed. *Sound Studies*. London: Routledge, 2013.
- and Les Back. "Introduction: Into Sound." *The Auditory Culture Reader*. Oxford: Berg, 2003. 1-18.
- Cage, John. 4'33". 1952. New York: Henmar, 2012.
- Chion, Michel. *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*. Trans. Claudia Gorbman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.
- Elster, Jon. *Ulysses and the Sirens: Studies in Rationality and Irrationality*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1984.
- Fabian, Johannes. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.
- Heffernan, James. *Museum of Words: The Politics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- Homer. *The Odyssey*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim. *Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry*. Boston: Roberts, 1887.
- Magoffin, Susan Shelby. *Down the Santa Fe Trail and into Mexico: The Diary of Susan Shelby Magoffin, 1846-1847*. Ed. Stella M. Drumm. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982.
- McLuhan, Marshall. "Five Sovereign Fingers Taxed the Breath." *Explorations in Communication: An Anthology*. Eds. Edmund Carpenter and Marshall McLuhan. Beacon Hill: Beacon, 1960. 207-08.
- . *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. "Ekphrasis and the Other." *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994. 151-81.
- . *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.
- Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London: Methuen, 1982.
- Pinch, Trevor and Karin Bijsterveld, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Sapir, Edward. Letter to Ruth Fulton Benedict. 26 August 1924. MS. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington.
- . "Music." *The Measure* 47 (1925): 11.

- . “Zuni.” *Poetry* 27.4 (1926): 18.
- Schafer, R. Murray. *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*. Rochester: Destiny, 1994.
- Scher, Steven Paul. *Verbal Music in German Literature*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968.
- Sterne, Jonathan. *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.
- . “Sonic Imaginations.” *The Sound Studies Reader*. Ed. Jonathan Sterne. London: Routledge, 2012. 1-18.
- , ed. *The Sound Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, 2012.
- . “The Theology of Sound: A Critique of Orality.” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 36 (2011): 207-25.
- Wolf, Werner. *The Musicalization of Fiction: A Study in the Theory and History of Intermediality*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999.
- . “(Inter)mediality and the Study of Literature.” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.3 (2011): 1-9. <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss3/2/> (20 January 2014).