How Sound is Sound History?
A Response to Mark Smith

Sound provides the most forceful stimulus that human beings experience, and the most evanescent. Periodic waves of air molecules strike against the listener’s eardrums and create vibrations inside the body. If the waves are strong enough (as, for example, when a large drum is struck), the vibrations can be felt in the viscera of the gut as well as in the ears. At the same time, sounds rapidly dissipate into nothing. For an historian interested in the sounds of the past, there would seem to be nothing there to study, at least until the advent of electromagnetic recording devices early in the twentieth century. Mark M. Smith’s article “Listening to the Heard Worlds of Antebellum America” thus represents a triumph of mind over matter.¹ Smith draws on taped interviews with former slaves made in the 1930s, but he has had to reconstruct most of the sounds he studies from written sources. One may readily sympathize with the daunting problems of documentation and interpretation that Smith faced. In writing *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor* (1999), I assembled evidence from travelers’ accounts, estate maps, letters, diaries, sermons, plays, poems, fictional narratives, ballads from oral tradition, and architectural remains and interpreted that evidence in relation to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century ideas about sound and the human body, and in
light of modern principles of acoustic ecology, psychoacoustics, architectural acoustics, and socio-linguistics. I have come to call the results “historical phenomenology,” a method that highlights the embodied nature of knowledge in historically constructed forms. As a scholar in English, I believe I can bring a cross-disciplinary perspective to Smith’s work, in which I also have a personal stake. I grew up in Mississippi in the 1950s amid the physical, political, and psychological remains of some of the phenomena that Smith studies. He made me listen afresh to the history I have lived with since childhood.

Smith’s article takes its place in an emerging interdisciplinary enterprise that Douglas Kahn, author of *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (1999), has dubbed “auditory culture,” and Smith’s *Listening to Nineteenth Century America* (2001) figures on Kahn’s list of recommended books about auditory culture. The foundational book in the study of sound, R. Murray Schafer’s *The Tuning of the World* (1977), focused on the here-and-now experiences of sound in cities, towns, industrial parks, and so-called “open” spaces, and his work continues to set the direction for the discipline of acoustic ecology, which has its epicenter at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia. For almost twenty years, anthropology has recognized sound studies as a sub-discipline, notably in the work of Steven Feld, whose first book, *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression* (1982), attempts, like Schafer’s work, to take sound as a primary reference point in the analysis of human culture. Feld studies the Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea, who live amid dense rain forests and thus depend on sound as much as vision to orient themselves in the world. This study, notwithstanding its intrinsic interest and importance, does not engage the questions that shape the study of sound as an historical phenomenon. The historical perspective focuses upon change in patterns or clusters of sound, which may, like any other historical phenomenon, appear and disappear. What happens when
the specific sounds can no longer be heard, or when the informants have died and the analyst and subjects cannot interact? Alain Corbin confronted just such logistical challenges in writing *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the Nineteenth-Century French Countryside* (French text 1994, English translation 1998). Corbin uses methods he used in an earlier study of smell to reconstruct what church bells meant to ordinary people in the course of their daily lives and to suggest how the bells connected them to events far beyond their fields.3

The disciplines represented in a symposium and subsequent book on “Hearing Culture” organized by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research attest to the interdisciplinary character of sound studies. Convened by an ethnomusicologist, the symposium will gather anthropologists, musicologists, an historian of film, an historian of medicine, an Arabic specialist, a media studies specialist, and an English professor. What draws together practitioners who hail from such diverse points of view? At least three principles in particular seem to unite them across their disciplinary differences: (1) They agree that sound has been neglected as an object of study; (2) they believe that sound offers a fundamentally different knowledge of the world than vision; and (3) they recognize that most academic disciplines remain vision-based, not only in the materials they study, but in the theoretical models they deploy to interpret them.

These points of convergence coexist with profound differences over the place of sound within each discipline. Sound constitutes the very essence of musicology as a subject. In English, my own specialty, sound offers a natural topic for study, and especially helps to recover the importance of oral culture in any capacious understanding of literature. Shakespeare’s contemporaries talked about going to “hear” a play, not to “see” one. Dozens of printed broadside ballads survive from the sixteenth century, and hundreds from the seventeenth century. In both centuries, Greek and Roman rhetoric provided the basic model for discussions of literature. Current trends
in literary scholarship, however, discourage the study of sound. The dominant methods in my discipline during the past twenty years—deconstruction, Lacanian psychoanalytical theory, and the version of cultural anthropology known as “new historicism”—cleave to the visual realm and profoundly distrust sense experience as the academic equivalent of what Marxists would call “false consciousness.” The study of sound challenges the principles of visual mastery that most academic disciplines assume as their platform. Classical rhetoricians encouraged speakers to station themselves within a “house of memory.” For Descartes’ scientific observer, knowledge exists as an object, something “out there” that can be judged from within coordinates. Derrida’s visual example of differance is two doors that invite labels like “Men” and “Women,” “in” and “out.” Identity politics imagines social space—and the texts that represent that space—in terms of “center” and “margin.” Such examples could easily be multiplied.

“Listening to the Heard Worlds of Antebellum America,” published in advance of Smith’s book, Listening to Nineteenth-Century America, establishes sound as an important reference point in several different projects of identity-formation: (1) how nineteenth-century Americans placed themselves vis-a-vis each other in social and racial terms; (2) how they imagined the character of the American nation as a whole; and (3) how they fastened on distinctive sounds to distinguish the North from the South in the decades preceding the War Between the States. The social elites who form Smith’s main group of informants prized the sounds of progress—the roar of machinery, the noises of workers, the clanging of traffic on roads. Such sounds proved especially significant when heard against the supposedly empty silences of the West. Smith notes how these social elites alternately feared Native Americans for their noiseless stealth and abhorred them for their war cries. Americans of means, both North and South, used sound to distinguish themselves from rowdy laborers, low-protestant religious extremists, uncouth vulgarians, and slaves. Smith interweaves attention to these aural class differences
with attention to the regional differences—“aural sectionalism”—that interest him most. Southern plantation owners and their apologists imagined themselves in quiet pastoral isolation, while northern industrialists and their apologists celebrated the noises that filled northern cities. The presence of slaves, Smith argues, challenged Southerners’ self-image. On the one hand, plantation owners imposed rules to keep their slaves quiet; on the other hand, they feared silence that might indicate the slaves had lives and plans of their own, especially when those plans seemed to include escape or rebellion. Smith demonstrates how slaves coped with the masters’ attempts to control the sounds the slaves could make.

We can judge the credibility of Smith’s article by the methods with which he explores three problems that confront all students of sound, particularly when the sounds in question occurred before recorded sound: how to catalogue the sounds to be studied, how to decode sound in non-aural evidence, and how to establish a syntax to make sense of the accumulated evidence. Smith has catalogued a treasure of sounds by trawling exhaustively through printed archives. Unpublished letters and journals, articles and editorials from newspapers large and small, magazine articles, poetry, legal ordinances, and the prospectus for a girls’ school in New Hampshire all yield highly suggestive evidence of the sounds that surrounded Americans in the mid nineteenth century, and what they thought about them. My own research alerted me to the large body of indirect evidence for sound in graphic documents. Some early modern men and women imagined, for example, that a person’s handwriting carried the sound of the writer’s voice. Printed broadside ballads include a variety of visual cues that help to project the tune and the words into the purchaser’s body. The repertory of sounds in plays often seems to have been precisely calculated for the space in which the play was to be performed. Smith exhibits particular subtlety as he listens for evidence of sound in buildings and physical artifacts. He discusses the absorbent properties of pine timbers and mud floors to muffle slaves’ voices. In a particularly striking passage, he presents
evidence that slaves sang and prayed into upturned pots to prevent their voices from carrying beyond their immediate surroundings.

Historians of sound may find it most difficult to establish a syntax in which to express their experiences. Different cultures value sound differently and to different degrees. How did nineteenth-century Americans order the sounds they made and heard? To answer that question, Smith turns, as did I, to the work of Murray Schafer and Barry Truax. In his seminal book *Acoustic Communication* (1984), Truax challenges analysts to free themselves from the narrow confines of speech and to attend to the full panoply of sounds within which human beings exist: music, animal cries, the sounds of wind and rain. Truax suggests that these sounds can be ranged along a continuum in which, as one moves from left to right, the duration of the sounds increase as the syntax that makes those sounds meaningful becomes looser:

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primal cries → speech → music → ambient sound
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Since primal cries (ah! oh! mmmm!) belong to the ambient world of animals as well as to human beings, I altered this left-to-right continuum to form a circle. Smith attends most to speech and ambient sounds, the latter heard by Smith (and most of his informants) as noise, and the tension between them constitutes a recurring motif in his study. Northerners and Southerners alike sharply distinguished between the loud, random noises of cities and the softer, more regular sounds of the countryside. Smith remains suspicious of music. Other scholars, he notes, have stressed music and dancing as licensed forms of expression for slaves. In contrast, Smith emphasizes the restrictions that plantation owners placed on the sounds slaves could make. As a result, those upturned pots become truly poignant signifiers of slavery. Smith’s attempt to reconstruct the sound world that slaves inhabited illustrates the potential of sound studies to give voice to the experiences of groups of people who seldom or never speak for themselves in written documents. In my own work, sound has a special ability to reveal the experiences of
such marginalized groups as women, illiterate laborers in England’s
shires, and the Native Americans who encountered the first English
settlers in New England and Virginia. Similarly, when Smith attends
to sound, slaves suddenly emerge out of the written documents with
startling, unexpected presence.

Smith also borrows the concept of “keynote sounds” from Schafer
and Truax to order the sounds he has catalogued, although his
method here leads to minor interpretative difficulties. Schafer iso-
lates the sounds of wind, water, forests, birds, insects, and animals
to illustrate in literal terms the distinctive character of specific ge-
ographical spaces for human listeners. Truax adds to Shafer’s list
the sounds of factories, highways, and other human constructions,
but he also speaks of actual sounds. Smith wants to extend Schafer
and Truax’s use of “keynote sounds” to include sounds “produced
by specific configurations of social and economic relations” (92).
Fair enough. Plenty of evidence suggests that Smith’s informants
heard the sounds around them in just the ways he describes, but
when he attempts to argue that they contributed to the War Between
the States, I sense a missing step. Smith stakes his causal claim on
the notion of “modal metaphors,” which Bernard Hibbitts defines
in “Making Sense of Metaphors: Visuality, Aurality, and the Re-
configuration of American Legal Discourse.” Metaphors become
“modal,” Hibbitts claims, when the people who use them accept
them as real. Thus, Smith argues, “Elites heard social order at the
everyday level of interaction and, simultaneously, as an abstraction,
often with the former reinforcing the latter. What they heard either
reassured or frightened them. Metaphors and analogies are clumsy
devices, because when actual sounds gain metaphorical status they
lose some of their precision. Southerners heard most Northerners
to be noisy, and Northerners heard most Southerners—slave and
free—to be disturbingly silent or cacophonous” (91). Smith loses the
precision of his argument when he moves from actual sounds to ab-
stractions, particularly after such a solidly grounded reconstruction
of the dominant sound worlds of nineteenth-century America. To
accept “aural sectionalism” as a cause for war, I need a sturdier bridge of evidence than Smith can build in the article’s last two pages, although he probably provides it in the ampler spaces of his book. (I wrote this response several months before Listening to Nineteenth-Century America was published.) The problem could be one of cause and “affect” or, perhaps, “affect” and cause: How do human beings transform physical sensations into abstract ideas?

When I call attention to this leap from the physical to metaphysical, I am criticizing myself as well as Smith. In the three years since The Acoustic World of Early Modern England was published, I have recognized that the circular syntax I improvised from Truax gives more emphasis to non-verbal sounds than most early modern thinkers would have accepted comfortably. Many witnesses—travelers, poets, musical composers, even farm laborers themselves—suggest that non-verbal sounds greatly influenced people’s interpretations of sounds in the countryside, in contrast to the words that dominated the heard syntax of the court and, to a lesser degree, the city. Men and women of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries distrusted the non-verbal sound they heard in the world around them. They expressed profound ambivalence about music, especially music that lacked words. Sound history, I believe, needs to proceed according to a strict line of inductive analysis, in which the witnesses themselves explicitly suggest or state the links between actual sounds and abstractions.

“Listening to the Heard Worlds of Antebellum America” extends to historians of all kinds an invitation to attend to a category of evidence that has been neglected, in part because the western intellectual tradition values vision over sound, in part because we lack hard evidence, and in part because we lack well-established methods to interpret the evidence that does exist. Smith’s article helps to remedy these problems even as it points to the need to proceed with inductive caution and to test our own concepts of what the sounds of the past mean against the testimony of people who actually heard those sounds as waves of air beating against eardrums.
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