

Soundscapes of People and Place

Carla Diaz

Western cultures in particular, says [composer Barry] Truax, have invested far more time and effort into establishing the visual landscape than they have any soundscape or acoustic sense of place. He thinks one reason that may be is because everything about acoustic spaces is fluid. We tend to like the solidity of a fixed visual map.

—Kathryn Miles, “Mapping the Bottom of the World,” *Ecotone* 20

About this guide

Ecotone's Sound Issue offers poetry, stories, essays, and a map of songbird call dialects, all of which engage with or evoke sound. Using writing from the issue, this guide aims to help students develop greater sensitivity to sound in their writing, and to recognize the use of it as an effective tool in rendering both character and scene.

These materials are geared toward undergraduate creative-writing courses, but they may be used in other contexts as well. Instructors are welcome to adapt this guide to suit their courses and classrooms. If you use or adapt these materials, in part or in full, please credit Carla Diaz and Teach *Ecotone*.

Some of the writing and art from Issue 20 is available at ecotonemagazine.org; the remainder can be found in the print edition of the magazine.

Relevant fields: Creative writing, English

Reading

Kathryn Miles, “Mapping the Bottom of the World”

Barbara Hurd, “The Ear Is a Lonely Hunter”

Luzene Hill, “Sovereignty through Print: New Type, and a New Letterpress-printed Book, in the Cherokee Syllabary”

Margaret Kimball, “Dave”

David Gessner, “A Quiet Lie of Nature Writing”

Aisha Sabatini Sloan, “D is for the Dance of Hours”

Questions for discussion

A) In Barbara Hurd's essay, “The Ear Is a Lonely Hunter,” she recalls walking in the woods with a tracking expert, paying attention to the pressure of her footsteps. She realizes she hasn't paid the same attention to the physical experience of touching the keys when prac-

ticing piano. How, she wonders, would that attention shape her playing? She recalls a piano lesson, during which her teacher reminds her to play:

as if you were reentering the piece anew each time...as if you were Mozart, creating each measure for the first time, exploring where the next note should go, a toe inching forward over uncertain ground.... Play as if your ear were the creator. (46)

What do you think the piano teacher means by these imperatives? In what ways has Hurd applied the lesson of using her ear as the creator to the writing of this essay?

B) In Luzene Hill's essay "Sovereignty through Print: New Type, and a New Letterpress-printed Book, in the Cherokee Syllabary," she includes a sample folio that shows a spread from the book, printed by artist and printer Frank Brannon, which includes both text and image. After spending time with these pages from the book, try to describe your sonic experience of them. What is the auditory effect of Hill's visual choices? How might the sonic experience of the book change depending on the reader?

C) Margaret Kimball uses color, geometric patterning, and empty space within images to create a sense of sound in her comic "Dave." Find and describe one example of the way in which Kimball manipulates sound and silence on the page. How might you use the example of her treatment of visual space to create rhythm, pacing, and volume in your own writing?

Sounds of Character

Writing exercise

In his essay "A Quiet Lie of Nature Writing," editor-in-chief David Gessner describes a morning in Colorado: "That morning, fog had chopped off the tops of the mountains, and then the afternoon rain, *spiced* with hail, *hammered* the roof of our house" (11; emphasis added). Elsewhere in Issue 20, in her essay "D is for the Dance of Hours," Aisha Sabatini Sloan writes that Aretha Franklin sings "with the crackling warmth and smokiness of a fire" (142). Both writers use senses of taste, touch, and smell to deepen their descriptions of sound. We will use this strategy to render character in a piece of fiction or nonfiction.

- i. First, think of someone you know. Write a short scene or moment of action in which they are doing something mundane—for example, sitting in traffic, cooking breakfast, making their bed.
- ii. Find three opportunities within this scene to expand by evoking an experience of sound. Consider the various synesthetic approaches available to you for describing things like color, texture, and flavor.
- iii. Swap work with a partner. In your partner's writing, highlight the descriptions that evoke sound most vividly. Then highlight one place where the writer might amplify their description.
- iv. After a break (a few minutes, a day, a week), reread your work. Revise it with your new thoughts, and your partner's feedback, in mind.