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“American Soundscapes”

Panel Proposal

The Word not Said, The Sound not Made: The Ineffable in Sound and Text

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Toni Morrison knew the value of the unspoken. “One has to work very carefully with what is in between the words, what is not said,” she told Caroline C. Denard, “which is measure, which is rhythm, ... it is what you don’t write that frequently gives what you write its power” (“Conversations” 67). What is in between the words is a soundscape of its own, it is not easily analyzed, but it is intelligible and carries significant meaning and power. Silence is a possible form of the unsaid, but not the only one. Morrison suggests “measure” and “rhythm,” as in *Beloved*, when in the woods Baby Suggs ends her sermon and “dance[s] ... the rest of what her heart had to say” (3). Other times, the ineffable may sound like howling, like the “fine cry—loud and long” in *Sula*, with “no bottom and ... no top, just circles and circles of sorrow” (*Sula*, 174). Here, the ineffable derives its power from being unquantifiable: it expands through space, filling the landscape with its inarticulate but all-encompassing truth.

The ineffable is what “cannot be expressed or described in language; too great for words; transcending expression; unspeakable, unutterable, inexpressible” (OED), and American literature has encountered it multiple times. American romanticism has cohabited with the ineffable in the form of intuitive knowledge: the “Species” that stands beyond this life in Emily Dickinson’s “The World is not Conclusion” is an illustrious case of the literary ineffable, since religion, science, philosophy, and the intellect are subdued by an unspeakable, and yet intelligible, afterworld that appears to the speaker as a mysterious soundscape: “Invisible, as Music – / But positive, as Sound –.” The archive confronts its visitors with the ineffable on a regular basis in the form of irreproducible meaning and unspeakable violence. It is a place that requires working around the wordless. Saidiya Hartman asks, unrhotorically, how we can “assign words” to “the groans and cries, the undecipherable songs, the crackle of fire in the cane fields, the laments for the dead, and the shouts of victory” (4). In the archive, Hartman struggles with the ineffable in terms of irreproducibility, too, as she begs to find the balance between writing of violence and “committing further violence in the act of narration” (2, 4).

This panel starts from the assumption that agencies do not need words to manifest themselves, but thrive in the ineffable as they do in alphabetic articulations. We are interested

in tracing the ways in which the ineffable carries meaning and power, and in the many shapes it takes, from dance, to music, howling, and silence, among many others. This panel particularly invites papers that put the history of early America or the 19th century in conversation with the present. However, depending on the number of submissions, we welcome papers on more strictly recent topics as well.

Panelists may explore the following areas and beyond:

- Types of ineffables and how they carry meaning, power, and agency
- Unspoken elements in texts and writing: punctuation, blanks, erasures
- Transnational and comparative approaches to the unspeakable
- The ineffable and the archive
- Resisting ableist discourses: the ineffable in disability studies
- Narrating spiritual and ancestral connections through the ineffable
- Close listening and close reading in comparison
- Practices of radical listening
- Transnational comparative approaches to the wordless, the silent, the ineffable
- Race and gender perspectives on the ineffable

Confirmed Paper

Dr. Mahshid Mayar (University of Mannheim)

“Breath-taking! – The Prosodics of Erasure in the Poetry of M. NourbeSe Philip,
Solmaz Sharif, and Philip Metres”

Works Cited

Dickinson, Emily. “The World is not Conclusion (373).”

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Accessed 24 August 2023.

Denard, Carolyn C., editor. *Toni Morrison: Conversations*. University Press of Mississippi, 2008.

Hartman, Saidiya. “Venus in Two Acts.” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2008, pp. 1-14.

“Ineffable.” *Oxford English Dictionary*.

<https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=ineffable>. Accessed 23 August 2023.

Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. Random House, 2014.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. 1987. Vintage, 2004.