

## **Proposal**

2024 DGfA Annual Meeting “American Soundscapes”

Oldenburg University

### **“Bird Sonics” –**

#### **Roundtable Discussion**

‘Bird sonics’ play an instrumental role in the American imagination. Unlike any other animal sounds, bird calls and bird ‘songs’ have prompted American writers and thinkers to correlate bird sounds and ‘melodies’ with the human voice, human experiences, and poetic creativity. Perhaps the most prominent example in American literature is Walt Whitman’s poem “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” in which the first-person speaker responds to the act of listening to a mockingbird’s song by “translating” it (“Listen’d to keep, to sing, now translating the notes,” 390) into a verbal “aria” (391) that creates a call-and-response duet of sorrow sung by “the he-bird” (388) and the reminiscing, aged romantic hero, culminating in the birth of the poet (“My own songs awaked from that hour,” 393).

Past and present criticism has primarily focused on the ways in which birds, their songs, and the responses to their singing serve as a source for a wide range of rhetorical devices in American poetry, including allegory, apostrophe, metaphor, personification, and symbol (see, for instance, the extensive critical work on Emily Dickinson’s use of bird imagery and rhetorical tropes to express, for instance, a variety of emotions in her poems: e.g., Simons 2019, Moore 2018, Schuman and Hodgman 2010). In recent years, critics and authors have also examined the topic of birds through the lens of environmentalism to discuss the relationship between nature, birds, and biographical experiences (e.g., Rogers 2020) and especially the link between the climate crisis and the steep decline of the diversity of avian species in the Anthropocene (e.g., Skoulding 2023, Werner 2021, Caracciolo 2020, and Egbert 2015; see also Jonathan Franzen’s 2010 novel *Freedom*).

Bird sonics, however, can be found outside of these fields of inquiry as well. They appear, for instance, in fiction, music, movies, magazines, advertisements, and cartoons – indeed, as soon as the topic is brought into the spotlight, birds and their songs and sounds will become noticeable everywhere. Our roundtable discussion intends to move beyond the horizons of contemporary criticism and discourse and invites speakers to explore the vast and

largely uncharted territory of bordertranscending bird sonics in North America and the Greater United States. While a few critics have begun to study the history of recording and reproducing bird calls and melodies in American (and European) culture (e.g., GoGwilt and Holm 2018 and Bevis 2010), the wider literary, socio-cultural, regional and (trans-)national, and historical contexts and developments of “American soundscapes” produced and shaped by birds have for the most part received little critical attention. Speakers may investigate one of the following or other thematic areas of this rich research field which lends itself to a broad variety of disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches (e.g., aesthetics, gender, class, critical race theory, philosophy/phenomenology, intermediality, affect theory, transnational and postcolonial studies):

- Bird sonics and space/place (national, transnational/global, urban, regional)
- Bird sonics and space/time (the relationship between geography and history, including environmental history)
- the cultural/social/political/economic dimensions of bird sounds and songs such as the socio-political implications in Maya Angelou’s 1969 memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and 1983 poem “Caged Bird”
- the different uses of bird sonics in the history of literary periods
- the intersection of birdsongs and human identity constructions (individual and community/collective)
- Bird sonics and the question of national symbolic power, e.g., in the form of “sonic bird wars” within North America and beyond (e.g., North vs. South and North America/mockingbird vs. Europe/lark and nightingale)
- the correlation of birdsongs/-sounds and music (e.g., classical music and jazz; see, for instance, Charlie “Bird” Parker’s 1966 album *Ornithology* as well as the different blues and jazz versions of the 1926 song “Bye, Bye, Blackbird”)
- bird songs and the history of recording technologies (e.g., musical notations, bird automata in the 19th century, tape recorder, video camera) and the role of recording technologies in circulating, archiving, and listening to bird sounds
- bird soundscapes in popular culture (e.g., 19th century magazine culture, advertisements, cartoons)
- bird sonics and the ‘musicalization’ of fiction and other art forms

- bird songs and cultural practices: e.g., whistling and whistling contests
- silence (the absence of bird soundscapes)
- bird sonics and pedagogy

Confirmed speaker:

Prof. Dr. Philipp Schweighauser (Univ. of Basel), “Contemporary Native American Bird Sonics”

Prospective participants are invited to submit

- **a 200-word abstract** for a **5-minute presentation** (Roundtable Discussion)
- **a 150-word bio-sketch**

Please email the information requested above to the panel organizers:

- Johanna Hartmann ([johanna.hartmann@amerikanistik.uni-halle.de](mailto:johanna.hartmann@amerikanistik.uni-halle.de))
- Julia Nitz ([julia.nitz@amerikanistik.uni-halle.de](mailto:julia.nitz@amerikanistik.uni-halle.de))
- Erik Redling ([erik.redling@amerikanistik.uni-halle.de](mailto:erik.redling@amerikanistik.uni-halle.de))

The deadline for email submissions is **January 31, 2024**.

We are looking forward to a stimulating interdisciplinary forum on bird sonics!

## Works Cited

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- Skoulding, Zoë. "‘All the Birds Had Called a Conference’: Songs of the Emergency." *Places That the Map Can’t Contain: Poetics in the Anthropocene*, edited by Julia Fiedorczuk and Paweł Piszczatowski, V&R Unipress, 2023, pp. 127–46.
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