

The Sounds of Progress: Acoustic Ecologies in American Literature

“The whistle of the locomotive penetrates my woods summer and winter, sounding like the scream of a hawk sailing over some farmer’s yard...”

– Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*.

Beginning with the primordial sounds of nature to the drone of industry and the chants, wails, and ringing church bells of revolution, the ever-increasing complexity of American acoustic ecologies sound out the speed and cost of progress, i.e. advancement through accumulation that attempt to expand existing boundaries associated with national progress. This so-called ‘advancement’ provokes a variety of conflicting attitudes in American society that range from ambivalence and uncertainty to conviction and ambition. Evident in Thoreau’s *Walden* as he describes the “soundmarks” of nature disrupted by the “sound signals” of the nearby railroad, readers of American literature have been and continue to be presented with a series of shifting sonic environments that both orient and disorient the reader, inviting them to ‘listen’ carefully to the world being shaped in the name of ‘progress.’

Where soundmarks, both natural and man-made, are analogous to landmarks acting as ever-present noises and components of the sonic environment in which we live, sound signals are the noises that pull us out of familiar surroundings and invite us to listen differently to our surroundings. R. Murray Schafer suggests that the natural and man-made sounds of a particular locality (its keynotes, sound signals, and soundmarks) can – “like other local artifacts” – represent a community’s identity, allowing them to be recognized and characterized by the soundscapes of their acoustic ecologies.

Working with and building on Schafer’s definition, we can see how acoustic ecologies make up a part of a wider cultural ecology – functioning as a crucial nodal point between cultural systems and phenomena, and ecological ones. This workshop will focus on the interdisciplinary overlap between sound and literature, exploring how acoustic ecologies are constructed as a way to call into question the problematics of and conflict between various ideas of ‘progress’ and the natural environment. To do so, the onus is on thinking ecologically and attempting to reorient our relationship, individually and collectively, with the natural world to put forward new critical ideas about what alternative ways of ‘moving forward’ or ‘advancement’ could look like in the Anthropocene, and how attending to acoustic ecologies can help bring those ideas to the fore.

Therefore, the position we work from is that acoustic ecologies documented in American literature demonstrate how cultural systems and phenomena interrelate with ecological ones and thus act as a heuristic for analysis. To explore this idea, we invite papers that examine how music, sound, noise, and voices, as well as the conspicuous absence thereof, in American Literature act as complex cultural constructions that may lend themselves to processes of individualization and/or collectivism and community identity, as well as act as instruments of political, religious, or ideological resistance for the shaping of a future that reorients our relationship with the natural world and helps develop notions of progress detached from mere Capitalist accumulation.

Possible questions to explore in this workshop include (but are not limited to) the following:

- What are the sounds of progress (where progress can signify any number of past and future visions)?

- Archaeoacoustics and the relationship between people and sound throughout history
- Conceptualization of space and territory through sound
- Conflict and progress
- How can we collectively and differently learn from nature to imagine new futures based on diverse listening practices and acoustic relationships in our worlds?
- Music, nature, and voice
- Sound and forms of resistance
- Sound/soundscapes and locality
- Sounds of nature
- Sound as a cultural ecology

Abstracts of no more than 300 words should be sent to david-john.cross@ilw.uni-stuttgart.de and amanda.halter@uni-jena.de. Please include your name, e-mail address, institutional affiliation, and a brief biography (max. 150 words).

Confirmed Speaker

Prof. Dr. Caroline Rosenthal (Jena): “Ripples and Rivering: The Sound of Ponds and Streams in American Literature.”