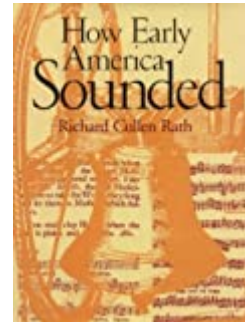




Richard Cullen Rath. *How Early America Sounded.* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003. xi + 227 pp. \$32.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4126-4.



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Learning to Read about Hearing Differently

The past ten years have seen the growth of a small genre of historiography relating to human sensory faculties, of which Richard Cullen Rath's *How Early America Sounded* is the latest.[1] What these studies share is an interest in recovering people's fleeting sensations of the world around them in early America, impressions that were immediate and ephemeral, even as they occurred. They have a common agenda in retrieving the ways in which sight, sound, and even smell bore significant differences from our own sensory perceptions and what these contrasts tell us that expands our understanding of early and nineteenth-century America. Beyond this starting point, however, each follows very different avenues of translation.

Richard Rath's wonderfully stimulating and complexly layered work utilizes a host of discrete, sonic events that encompass multiple faiths, ethnicities, personalities, and locales that move fluidly from Europe, Africa, the Caribbean, and throughout eastern North America. Organized by aural typologies rather than chronologically, the text begins with non-human sounds in nature and moves incrementally through degrees of

human intention. It eventually arrives at "nonlinguistic vocalizations such as groans, howls, sighs, and roars" while traveling temporally all over the seventeenth and much of the eighteenth centuries (p. 120). Starting with an exegesis of why early colonists were more apt to attribute destructive power to thunder than lightning, Rath introduces us to distinct world-views across European, Native-American, and African-American cultures that heard supranatural causality where we hear a "natural" lack of metaphysical meaning. Traditionally delimited as superstition, Rath uses this disjunction as a gateway to comprehending a transformative time between widespread illiteracy and mass literacy when, he maintains, sound had more interceding power than it does today.

Rath's disinterest in the primacy of language is calculated. He argues against the use of "orality" as a cultural predecessor and functional opposite of literacy but rather for a modern hindsight born of the intense visuality of reading itself that tends "to reduce the soundscape to spoken language" (p. 47). Therefore, a new understanding of hearing in this transitional period, after the

invention of moveable type but before its commodification, enables us to transcend some of our own perceptual prejudices. We can still hear an older, sensual order that gives greater privilege to sound-ways, reinforcing and intertwined with speech, even as many of our sources are still from printed texts.

In the second chapter, Rath moves into “the world we have lost” within man-made instrumentation. He continues his rejection of orality as the uncivilized paradigm by demonstrating how different segments of American society often relied on ringing bells, blowing horns, firing guns, and beating drums to gather together the culturally kindred or receive peacefully those regarded as “other.” These invitations to social order created a public within “earshot,” a measure of disembodied civilization that extended far beyond the face-to-face restrictions that orality implies. Various ritual uses of instruments inherently signified a civic authority in different ways that called upon a community of listeners. Those out of earshot, and thus beyond the pale, could suffer the various consequences of isolation that ranged from not knowing the Sabbath day to being unaware of an Indian attack.

Displaced and culturally uprooted African slaves could also use codes of tribal origin imbedded in complex drumming rhythms to help construct new social identities. The second half of this chapter, by far the longest of the book, extensively details how slaves in Jamaica in the 1680s overlaid different rhythms and modal scales from Angolan, Papa, and Koromanti musical backgrounds. In this rare plantation account, complete with European notation, they improvised songs that were mutually intelligible within a group of slaves who probably could not understand each other’s languages.[2] Rath asserts this musical pidginization of first generation slaves was an emblematic precursor of the larger creolization being negotiated within all slave communities in the western hemisphere among second generation slaves, the faint outlines of which are audible as well as visible.

A brief discussion follows of the doctrinal implications of acoustics found in Catholic and Protestant churches as well as variations in the sound-reflecting properties of meeting houses in the Chesapeake, New England, and Quaker areas. This discussion is still carefully removed from actual speech, since it looks at the aural *effects* of sermons and singing. Rath continues to maintain analytic tension with the dominant medium of visibility by articulating the subtly different ways that priests, ministers, congregations, and meetings presented themselves to each other, always mediated by a

consideration of sound.

In the last third of the book, human utterance is directly considered, although the emphasis here is on paralinguistics and vocables rather than language. Colonists marginalized speech by those they placed outside of their society by denigrating it in non-linguistic terms. Rath examines the seventeenth-century boundaries between civil and uncivil speech in public spaces defined by hearing rather than seeing. Exploring the porous divisions between earthly and spiritual realms of this period, he employs a three-dimensional model of intersecting planes, horizontal/material and vertical/religious, that proceed, respectively, from civil to savage and from visible to invisible. Thereafter, examples of “clamor, discourse, humming, murmurs, muttering, railing, rants, roaring, swearing ... whispers” and howling can be located along and within this conceptual imagery (p. 120). Rath concludes, from these contests over socially acceptable speech characterized by vocal dissonance, that a “‘public hearing’ rather than a ‘public sphere’” generated “plural American identities” rather than “a single national identity arising later in the eighteenth century” (p. 143). Grounded in several previous studies of colonial speech, this compelling argument for multiple American identities “in tension with each other without necessarily resolving into one” is one of many useful constructs that the author employs in his expansive scholarship.[3]

Native American vocalizations were placed in a separate category as “otherness,” both as characterized by whites to distinguish them from white vocalizations, as well as the unique uses to which Indians employed them among themselves. English phoneticization of the Massachusetts native language in Puritan missionary John Eliot’s Indian bible attempted to linguistically colonize native culture; captured warriors’ death songs under torture by their native enemies conveyed defiance outside of understood speech; intertribal councils signified consent and understanding by a universally spoken vocable “yo-hah”; and natives used wampum belts and designated individuals’ memories within tribes as mnemonic devices to make diplomatic agreements valid. Thus, Native Americans also employed many different sound-ways to communicate around and between orality strictly understood as speech.

In his conclusion, Rath, finally and briefly, articulates the conjectural metastructure that is implied in his earlier arguments for reconsidering the nuances of hearing in early America, the *why* of this sonic shift as well as the *how*. He contrasts his conclusions with similar ideas

of social theorists Marshal McLuhan, Benedict Anderson, Max Weber, and Jurgen Habermas while acknowledging his own linkage with print and the public sphere in the work of other American historians.[4] Rath's eventual goal is tracing the rise of a western sense of modernity in America that was largely in place by the end of the eighteenth century, of which a "truer understanding comes from grappling with the full complexity of early American communication networks" (p. 179). If we accept Weber's notion that the advent of modernity coincided with a world become "disenchanted," then Rath's present undertaking means to describe the slow diminution of a "world chanted into being" (p. 173). The later repercussions of this in America meant that "the nation was a community imagined into being sonically from the bottom up as much as it was visually imagined from the top down through mass print culture" (p. 176).

How Early America Sounded is marvelously uninhibited in its search for interpretational depth in understanding how differently seventeenth-century people made sense of what they heard. While this is a major asset to its iconoclastic scholarship and broad utility, Rath occasionally darts to conclusions in details where we might reasonably expect a little more circumspection. For instance, his musical analysis of layered African influences in the Frenchman Baptiste's transcription of three slave songs is perceptive but we are asked to take the notational rendering of an idiom very unfamiliar to European ears at face value, where clearly a cross-cultural transliteration had taken place (pp. 68-77). In his discerning examination of the acoustic properties of New England meeting houses, Rath asks "why build such a huge vault?" He proceeds to connect the undoubted appreciation of reverberation effects with intentional design, ignoring more mundane considerations of vernacular construction traditions and heavy snow loads in a colder age (pp. 107-113).

There are other similar leaps of faith that push sources, but these are small rejoinders that do not impinge on the cogency of his arguments, in part or in sum. Rath has notified us in his preface that the subject "requires an ability or at least a willingness on your part to be repeatedly decentered" (p. x). However, this should not be construed as a need to reduce to incomprehensibility. His etymologies of word senses with alternate historical connotations of hearing are derived from OED references and some historians may find refreshing his characterization of the linguistic turn to history as "the product of a visually dominated, hyper-literate epistemology that has mistaken the map for the territory, the text for

the world" (p. 181). In the end, we must recall the author's disclaimer in his introduction that his concluding explanation for the process he so extensively describes is purposely foreshortened because it deserves greater attention on its own in a future treatment. We look forward to that becoming available.

Notes

[1]. Constance Classen, David Howes, and Anthony Synnott, *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Alain Corbin, *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the Nineteenth-Century French Countryside* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Mark M. Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002); Peter Charles Hoffer, *Sensory Worlds in Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); and Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).

[2]. See also Richard Rath, "African Music in Seventeenth-Century Jamaica: Cultural Transit and Transition," *William and Mary Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (1993): pp. 700-726, for the same text.

[3]. Robert Blair St. George, "Heated Speech and Literacy in Seventeenth-Century New England," in *Seventeenth-Century New England*, ed. David G. Allen and David D. Hall (Boston, 1985); Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); and Jane Neill Kamensky, *Governing the Tongue: The Politics of Speech in Early New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[4]. Harry S. Stout, "Religion, Communications, and the Ideological Origins of the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (1977): pp. 510-41; Frank Lambert, "Pedlar in Divinity": *George Whitefield and the Transatlantic Revivals, 1737-1770* (Princeton, 1994); David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Julius Scott, "The Common Wind: Currents of Afro-American Communication in the Era of the Haitian Revolution" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1986); Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Buford Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden His-*

tory of the Revolutionary Atlantic (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000); and Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

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