Overlooking the past

“Overlooking the Past” answers the question of why we should study the history of the senses, and of hearing in particular. In order to do so, we have to come to terms with two ideas: first, that the senses are historically and culturally contingent, and second, that modern scholarship has a visual bias built into it which has to be recognized and grappled with in order to situate the importance of hearing historically.

# Senses have histories

When I told a linguist, steeped in cognitive science, that I was working on how hearing had changed over the past few centuries he was dismissive. On first glance, the senses are biological facts, their characteristics and qualities matters of the unchanging or only glacially changing natural inheritance of humans. A few hundred years was the blink of an eye in evolutionary terms, so how could hearing possibly have a history? And furthermore, sound is ephemeral, going out of existence even as it comes in. How to write a history of *that?* Yet, as I hope to demonstrate in this book, hearing does have a history, or more precisely, many histories which left clear traces that are not hard for historians to discern, at least not for the ones willing to listen in as well as look back on the past.

# More than meets the ear

At the outset, I need to make clear that I am not making any case for biological changes in hearing. As far as I can tell, there have been no significant mutations or evolutions in the anatomical apparatus from the ears to the brain for the length of human history. The parts of the ear that mediate sound are the tools with which we hear, necessary to hearing, but not sufficient to explain it. Hearing itself is a more complex and hazier mental and social process, shaped only in part by anatomy, neurons and gray matter.

The bridge between sensory nature and sensory culture lies in the process of perception, which William Blake, and later Aldous Huxley, thought of as having doors through which we see, hear, touch, taste, and smell. These doors normally let in some information from the senses but block out much. They can be transformed through drugs -- as were Huxley’s by mescaline -- or religious experience and even conscious effort.[[1]](#footnote-1) In other words, although perception perhaps has a brute biological aspect to it, it remains nonetheless malleable and thus susceptible to culture. The word “perceive” comes from the Latin *capere,* meaning “to take, seize, lay hold of,” and the prefix *per,* meaning roughly “through.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The doors are the culturally fashioned (and perhaps chemically modified) filters – the senses -- through which we reach in order to take hold of the world. There is an element of volition, intent, and thus agency implied here. And where these exist, there lie human histories. In fact, a definition of culture I like is that it is nothing more nor less than how we make sense of our worlds.

The notion that we quite literally "make sense" lies at the heart of how and why we might consider undertaking histories of the senses. If we accept the above definition of culture as a reasonable working proposition, then a prerequisite for writing any sort of cultural history would be to understand how past people made sense of their worlds. Lacking that, how can we even begin to see the world through their eyes and hear it through their ears. Indeed, perhaps we cannot, but if we give up here, we lose nearly all of cultural history in the bargain. Instead, it makes more sense to give up on any idea of absolute certainty and proceed as best we can, trying to understand how historical actors made sense of their worlds using all the tools of the historian’s craft, humbled but not stopped by the realization that we may be wrong. In fact, giving up this certainty without giving up everything else has seemed to me a good way to navigate the terrain between the poles of unobtainable objectivity, and oxymoronic absolute relativism, between history as fact and history as fiction.

# We are implicated

Perceptive readers might note a hitch in this plan though. If historical actors lived in sensory worlds of their own construction, then so must we. We in the present are implicated in the historical processes of sensory shift. There is no place of sensorial neutrality, outside of culture or history. We need to ask: How do our present habits of perception shape the ways we perceive the past? Awareness of such biases—denaturalizing our own perception and placing it in its historical time and place—is a necessary first step in any attempt at a history of the senses.

Take a simple example, one that set me on the path toward writing a history of hearing in the first place. When I was an undergraduate, I was reading about folk beliefs concerning lightning in the seventeenth century. I happened to be working through some of the same sources for my senior thesis, and I noticed that oftentimes where the modern books wrote of lightning, the sources they referred to talked of thunder. I asked my advisor why this was so, and he had the wisdom to say to his slightly obsessive compulsive student he did not know and that I ought to explore it further. I found more of these odd substitutions as a graduate student: a nineteenth century pamphlet on thunderstorms in seventeenth-century New England changed thunder to lightning. In a section describing Native American beliefs, the early twentieth-century editor of the *Jesuit Relations* silently translated the *tonnere* of the original French to lightning, even though he meticulously translated the plural, *tonne,* to lightnings, a detail important for recovering Native American thoughts on the subject. The New England antiquarian Sidney Perley even noted in his 1891 book about storms in colonial New England that “it was generally supposed that thunder and not lightning caused the damage,” though he gave no explanation for the supposition or why it changed.[[3]](#footnote-3) In fact, I found enough to recover audible worlds of European Americans, Native Americans, and African Americans that were remarkably different from our own. But with the exception of attention to “oral culture,” which as we shall see, is not historically well-grounded, this older audible world slipped from historical consciousness, overlooked after Perley’s observations. Why did it disappear? In order to come to terms with the sensory regimes of the past, we need to grapple with our own first.

{~!@ grapple here}

# Overlooking the Past

Scholars have long noted the visual bias of western culture in general and present-day scholarship in particular. Marshall McLuhan, drawing insights from historian Lucien Febvre and economist Harold Innis, attributed the bias to literacy and print culture. By dint of us taking in much of the world through our eyes, serially, from left to right, using a small set of infinitely repeatable and reusable characters, he derived western science, industry, arts, philosophy, and politics as inevitable outcomes. Western typographic man, he claimed had traded an ear for an eye. In more prosaic moments, he wrote more sensibly of a shift in the ratio of the senses – away from hearing and toward vision -- at the heart of the modern West.[[4]](#footnote-4) Others have taken the invention of two dimensional perspective or some other aspect of western art as a starting point, while others still have said, or more often just presumed, that seeing preceded and naturally entailed the western mind (comprising developments in the arts, science, philosophy, and politics) as if we could not come to these innovations without first being able to see properly, as we putatively do.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The circularity of this last position is a consequence of the invisibility of vision in much the same way a fish might be the last to discover water. This leads to a strange construction of visuality as not having much to do with language, as if the words on a page of writing about visual culture are absorbed by osmosis rather than by the eyes. Writing is perceived to be somehow ear-oriented (Derrida’s Grammatology) or more often, sensorially neutral, pure thought untouched by a medium. And language, in spite of protestations about the aurality of the *logos*, is generally considered only so far as it can appear on a page, so much so that linguists name the parts of language that can be sounded but not written “paralanguage” meaning quite literally something beside language, not of it. (OED “para”). One of McLuhan’s contributions has been to bring literacy and print back into the realm of the senses, although for the most part people “doing” visual culture have ignored this in favor relegating language to *logos* and the ear, even as they produce it for and consume it with the eye, quite literally overlooking the past.

~!@ check transitions and look for rep

# Problems

# Evanescence

Before we can learn to listen to the past, we have to take into account a few objections and make one of our own.

One of the problems that came up immediately upon setting out to write sonic history was the belief that, unlike a document, sound is ephemeral, going out of existence even as it happened. Three factors mitigate this objection. The first is that this comparison is misleading if not mistaken. Historians do not write the history of documents for the most part (discounting for the moment the important work done in the history of the book as material culture); they interpret the past, all of which has gone out of existence as soon as it came into being, just like its sounds. And just like any other experiences, sound and hearing can be partially recovered and interpreted from documents and material culture.

Second, sound is not as ephemeral as we first might think. Thunder presumably sounds much the same today as it did three or four centuries ago. Bells toll for the most part the same notes (where they have not been muffled or replaced with amplified recordings). Acoustic spaces designed to reverberate a particular way centuries ago still do so today. Or take for example the Puritan John Gyles’s description of the sound of turtles copulating, which he described as sounding like “a Woman washing her Linnen with a batting staff” from half a mile away.[[6]](#endnote-1) Presumably the turtles still make the same sounds. Gyles wrote for an audience that he assumed knew the sound of batting staffs on laundry, a sound no longer common to life in the twenty-first century. The turtles let us listen in not only on their amorous adventures, but on a sound culled from seventeenth-century everyday life, one that would normally mark the hearer as being within half a mile or so of a familiar community.

The problem of ephemerality is often used to discount oral histories, with historians likening the degradation of knowledge transmitted orally to the children’s game of telephone where a message is written down then whispered from one person to the next, with the result at the other end often differing greatly from the input. The analogy is flawed, however, in that it likens the privacy of reading silently to oneself to the community relying on oral histories. Knowledge transmission in Native American oral cultures took place not in this individualistic way but communally. An example from the eighteenth century serves to illustrate the process. At treaty negotiations, the Iroquois assigned each article proposed by the Whites to a particular sachem and his people. When the Whites had finished speaking, the Indian that the Iroquois assigned as “orator” would repeat the speech, prompted at the right moments by the sachem responsible for a particular point. When framing their own proposals, the Iroquois would give a stick to a sachem corresponding to each point. When the orator spoke, he would be prompted by the appropriate sachem. That sachem, in turn, relied on all of the people under him to get his part right. The process had a built-in accountability system and redundancy that made it robust through time.[[7]](#endnote-2)

Catastrophic change, on a scale that would have disrupted the transmission of knowledge even in any literate society, did take its toll on Indian knowledge and memory. When the majority of a population dies young, the redundancy and robustness break down and knowledge is lost. In fact, the same broad process of catastrophic change did wipe out the histories of one literate Native American people, the Aztecs, who lost not just a huge proportion of their population, but their written records to the Spanish colonial onslaught. But we must not exaggerate this process. Some of the wampum belts -- and their meanings -- remain with Indian nations, their stories intact to this day. The U.S. government still honors the treaty of Canandaigua, made and recorded in wampum in 1794, by distributing bolts of cloth to the Six Nations each year. The implications of this treaty for sovereignty and land ownership are still being played out in the federal court system today, with initial findings in favor of the Iroquois case based on knowledge maintained orally through time in this fashion.[[8]](#endnote-3)

The third solution to the issue of ephemerality, and perhaps the most important for my own work, has been to carefully delineate what it is that I am studying, namely something I call *soundways*: “the paths, trajectories, transformations, mediations, practices, and techniques -- in short, the *ways* -- that people employ to interpret and express their attitudes and beliefs about sound. I am not so much concerned with the underlying beliefs, historically inaccessible as they often are, or the concrete expressions themselves [where the problem of ephemerality does come up], so much as the ways between them.” Soundways of this sort can readily be found in many different types of documents, textual and otherwise, and they are no more nor less ephemeral than any other human patterns in the past.[[9]](#endnote-4)

# Significance

Another problem of sensory history in general has been the question of significance. Some scholars have made compelling cases that paying attention to senses other than vision can further our understanding of long-standing historical problems.[[10]](#footnote-6) Another approach has been to argue that the senses are in fact causal themselves, though I for one remain a skeptic in this regard.[[11]](#footnote-7) A third reason, which guides my research, is that if we are to understand people from the past on their own terms and they perceived their worlds differently than we do, then we need to understand how those perceptions differed in order to understand them at all.

# Flaws Reframed

Interestingly, a couple of the “flaws” of oral cultures have been reframed in the Internet age as features. Continuously updateable media are touted for their capability of incorporating corrections and keeping information up to date: texts need never become obsolete. But this feature is just a positive spin put on the “problem” of ephemerality. The fixity of knowledge was touted by proponents of the effects of print as a wellspring of civilization itself. Second, wide-area computer networks, with the Internet as the prime example, are connected by many different routes, so that if any one node is knocked out, the network stays connected and no knowledge is lost. This massive redundancy is the measure of a “robust” network. Knowledge is distributed rather than centralized in the new media. But the distribution of knowledge across a human network was precisely the “flaw” that print and literacy corrected through the process of centralizing knowledge into authoritative editions. In principle, massive redundancy is no different from Native American communal memorization. Perhaps the return of these characteristics of oral cultures indicates another shift in the senses in the wind, toward some new kind of audible world.

# A century of semi-sound studies

We cannot, however, just overrule these objections and proceed as before to do sonic history. For the century or so after Perley’s book, nearly all the historical work that treated sound in any way has been concerned with music, the ethnography of speaking, or something called “oral culture.” One musician in particular holds a place as a forerunner to today’s sonic histories, R. Murray Schafer. In his 1977 book *The Tuning of the World*, he coined the terms *soundscape* and *soundmark.* The first is the sonic analog to a landscape, with all the connotations of social constructedness that come with that term. Soundmarks are the sonic equivalent to landmarks. They are the keynote sounds that define a soundscape.[[12]](#footnote-8) Schafer’s founding contribution is invaluable, but his work is of limited value for historians. Notions of declension, loss, purity, and pollution imbue his work with a nostalgia for a past that probably never existed.

## Af-Am music and Dialect

Much of the research on music and the ethnography of speaking has not been directly concerned with sound per se, but historians of hearing can claim it as an antecedent. For centuries past, much of what we know of African Americans’ historical culture comes to us via descriptions of the sounds they made, their language and music in particular. For example, Africans used drumming and horn music as immanent expressions of state power. African griots used the sounds of their songs to record histories and provide legitimacy to rulers. Enslaved Africans successfully carried both of these practices—and many others—to the Americas in creolized forms, the stateliness of African practices replaced with musical languages used to organize revolts and to pass on knowledge under the duress of slavery. The role of music in strengthening African American life – and later, as it became a multi-billion dollar international industry, American life in general – has been widely and ably documented.[[13]](#footnote-9)

Another fruitful field has been the study of African American dialect patterns in documents from the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries. Until the 1950s, linguists and historians dismissed black speech as corrupted and degraded forms of European language. Only once linguists began to seriously study the process of creolization did it become apparent that complex social forces came into play in the formation of African American dialects. The sounds of the resulting speech patterns, though valued differently by insiders and outsiders, became important markers of race, and linguists have demonstrated that Black English was systematically different from that of Whites.[[14]](#footnote-10)

## Sociology of Speech

Rewrite with Baumann and the brit pop culture historian….

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, scholars such as Robert Blair St. George, Jane Kamensky, Kathleen Brown, and Mary Beth Norton did remarkable work on the ethnography of speaking in early American history. Attending to speech crimes, gossip networks, and prescriptive literature attempting to “govern the tongue,” these historians have deepened our understanding of early Americans who are otherwise neglected. The study of speech patterns has gone a long way toward the gendering of early American history, as these scholars have determined that men’s and women’s speech differed in important ways. Of particular note is Brown’s intersectional approach to speech (and other factors) to give a nuanced and compelling explanation for the evolution of race, class, sex, and gender relations in seventeenth-century Virginia.[[15]](#footnote-11)

# Sound Studies

During the late 1990s several scholars independently began to think about the history of sound and hearing, all at around the same time. Lisa Gitelman, Douglas Kahn, John Picker, Leigh Eric Schmidt, Mark Smith, Bruce Smith, Jonathan Sterne, Emily Thompson, Shane White and Graham White, and I were all working on projects dealing with the soundscape in one way or another during this time. It is unclear what precipitated this simultaneous interest, but it has produced a spate of interesting books and articles in the past few years.

# Modernity

A theme common to all in one way or another is the relation of sound to modernity. My *How Early America Sounded* is concerned with sonic worlds that antedated and attended the early modern transformation. Schmidt’s work proposes a counter-enlightenment religious tradition running from the late eighteenth century through the present that is suspicious of the visible world and by extension modernity and much more attuned to sound than the Enlightenment tradition. Mark Smith, writing about the nineteenth century, shows how the North and the South had their own keynote sounds, the modernizing hum of industry in the former and the anti-modern sounds—and silences—of slavery and the plantation in the latter. In the years leading up to the Civil War, each side became more disturbed with the other’s keynote sounds. Attitudes and beliefs about sound, argues Smith, both reflected and fostered sectional differences. Gitelman, Kahn, and Sterne are each concerned with the relationship between the introduction of new sonic media in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and modernity, while Thompson finds modernity to have developed a defining sound of its own in the first half of the twentieth century. [[16]](#footnote-12)

In my own work, the more I sought out aural beliefs in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the more I found: thunder over lightning, bells over steeples, swearing over signing, hearsay over eye-witnessing, and saying over writing. But like Thomass English folk magic, this rich audible world was in a slow decline. By the late eighteenth century it had undergone a gradual but radical shift toward the visual terminology favored today. Lightning did the damage; visual considerations overrode acoustical design in places of worship; signatures replaced oaths as what made an agreement tangible; cursing ceased to be a crime. I wondered what the older, audible world was like, and what it and its subsequent visualization meant.

# Orality

The debates about orality provided a key to explaining both the earlier audibly richer world and the shift toward the visual that I found. Marshall McLuhan, drawing on the work of historians Harold Innis and Lucién Febvre, argued that Europeans and European Americans “traded an ear for an eye” with the rise of print in the sixteenth century. In a less provocative moment, McLuhan said what he meant more exactly and more defensibly, namely that print led to “a shift in the ratio of the senses” away from sound and hearing and toward the observable world, culminating in the aptly named Enlightenment.[[17]](#footnote-13)

~!@

## A State of nature

Assuming that a shift in the senses arises from literacy, literary critic Walter Ong and anthropologist Jack Goody have framed highly influential—but problematic—theories about the nature of “pre-literate” or “oral” cultures that historians have relied on extensively, sometimes without knowing it. In theories of orality, the meaning of the audible world is reduced to a function of oral culture.” In general, western scholarship treats oral culture under the rubric of the literacy hypothesis: orality serves as the background from which rose the edifice of print and mass literacy after the Reformation in western culture. According to Ong and Goody, if we want to know what oral culture was like, we need only find pristine oral cultures in the present that have not been influenced by print culture.[[18]](#footnote-14) According to proponents of the literacy hypothesis, modern (here synonymous with “literate”) forms of thought, with their visual, textual base are inevitable, because they are what actually happened.

Adopting Ong and Goody’s position means that historians conceive of orality as an initial, natural, and primitive state of mind. Being in a state of nature, it is unchanging, ahistorical. Thus, once we know the intrinsic properties of orality, we know how people labeled “oral” are without needing to document anything. Ong suggests that orality is the more accurate term for what Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and Claude Lévi-Strauss have called the “savage” or “primitive” mind. He has cataloged traits he believes arise from intrinsic properties of sound in oral cultures and vision in literate cultures. Goody has also focused on the different cognitive sets available to literate and pre-literate peoples, aiming his anthropological gaze specifically at twentieth-century residents of northern Ghana. To McLuhan, Ong, Goody, and their adherents (of whom there are more than at first seems apparent), sound is perceived as ephemeral, face-to-face, and having a presence. In contrast, vision and the mindset that goes along with literacy and print is associated with objectivity, list-making, repeatability, mass distribution, archiving, and the manipulation of information without reference to context. These scholars argue that oral or pre-literate people are not cognitively equipped for abstract thought, always thinking in concrete terms instead.[[19]](#footnote-15)

## Orality inferred, not documented

Scholars have relied on the theory of orality, not documentary sources, to say much about societies where print and literacy were rarer. Those deemed “oral” and thus pre-modern at one time or another include Native Americans, seventeenth-century Puritan women, seventeenth-century Puritans in general (though in this case we are considering the most literate population in the world at the time—more on that later), seventeenth-century New Yorkers along with their Dutch predecessors, eighteenth-century Virginians, women of the early Republic who could not read, and African Americans. All of these claims take Ong as their source, though some do so indirectly and perhaps unintentionally. For example, Michael Warner takes the time to reject Ongian readings of oral culture explicitly, instead embracing Rhys Isaac’s interpretation of early Virginians’ orality as more nuanced. Yet ironically, Isaac bases his construction of Chesapeake orality on Ong rather than documentary sources.[[20]](#footnote-16)

# A broader conception of Sound Studies

A broader conception of sonic history, one that takes in more than just the portions of speech that can be reduced to print (for that is in fact what orality is) provides a corrective to this ahistoricism. Perhaps the biggest obstacle to implementing this historically grounded orality for someone new to sonic history is that of de-centering and denaturalizing one’s own sensory world. The modern soundscape is shaped extensively by literacy, so speech—or at least the portion of speech reducible to text—holds a privileged position for us. If we dispense with orality for a moment, historians of sound can move away from defining orality only as a lack of what it is held up against, namely print literacy. A historically grounded orality needs to be more than simply a foil for literacy and print culture.

Maybe put soundscape chart in?

## The Implicational SOundscape

A full consideration of the soundscape would include silence, non-human sounds, human instrumental sounds, vocal but nonverbal sounds, as well as orality. Silence is differentiated from sound obviously. Mark Smith in particular has demonstrated the importance of African American silences in the antebellum South, which planters read uncertainly, with a sense of foreboding. Silences gave enslaved African Americans something of their own, out of reach from the master class.

### Inanimate

Once in the realm of the audible, we now tend to divide sounds into animate and inanimate. The latter includes things like thunder, wind, waves, or running water. While few people today ascribe agency to such sounds, particularly if educated in the western intellectual tradition, in the seventeenth century both Native Americans and Europeans associated sound with living, intentional forces. Our category of inanimate sounds would have seemed oxymoronic to most people. For most if not all seventeenth-century Europeans and Euro-Americans, many natural sounds had an intelligent, willful source. This made sense in a world with few mechanical sounds that were not produced by the continual application of human or animal power (one notable exception would be water-driven mills). If no earthly source was attributable, then the sounds were usually considered to be supernatural messages. For example, the sounds of thunder and storms were understood as being intended to communicate with humans. In the case of thunder, either god or devils could be at work. Beginning as early as 1686, Harvard students heard Charles Morton lecture on thunder as simply a natural phenomena, but Morton was fighting a lonely battle. While his lectures did not see publication until 1940, Increase Mather’s book of remarkable providences, which interpreted thunder as the loud-speaking voice of God, went through many editions as a perennial bestseller. This belief in the animacy and intentionality of thunder was pervasive in the seventeenth century.[[21]](#footnote-17)

A similar but slightly different pattern held for Native Americans. Like Euro-Americans, they intimately tied sound and intelligent life to each other. But where Europeans heard messages directed specifically toward themselves, Native Americans tended to interpret natural sounds as intentional acts of intelligent beings not necessarily intended for humans. People were not the center of the attention of the supernatural world, so where Puritans might have heard the voice of God telling them to repent in thunder, Native Americans might have heard a ball game that had nothing directly to do with them. The thunder might have just been a poorly aimed shot.[[22]](#footnote-18)

Already, setting aside orality yields historically documented ways of hearing that subvert the literary hypothesis. If New England Puritans were the most literate society in the world at the time, how is it they held these—and many other—powerful sonic beliefs which seem strange to us today? And limiting Native American beliefs to “orality” deafens us to the rich, historically documented soundways other than speech.

### Instrumental

Adding in animacy (setting aside animal sounds), we come to human-made sounds. Animate sounds can in turn be divided into vocal and non-vocal sounds. Perhaps a better term for the latter would be instrumental sounds. These would be sounds made by shaping the environment, and there are two types: those actively producing a sound, like musical instruments or bells, and instruments for shaping the sounds within them, such as the interiors of buildings. The latter constitutes much of the field of acoustics. Much care was given to the obtaining and upkeep of bells, and to the mapping out of proper acoustic spaces in churches and meetinghouses. People rang in the birthdays of royalty, soldiers were drummed out of the corps. Bells and other non-vocal sounds belie the claim that sound-based cultures are by definition “face-to-face.” Protestant church acoustics avoided graven sounds like excessive reverberation in favor of short echoes that amplified and reinforced the clarity of the ministers’ voice. Seating patterns in Puritan churches that make no sense when considered visually clearly show the rank and status of the churchgoers when we factor in acoustics.[[23]](#footnote-19)

### Nonverbal vocalizations

Vocal sounds can in turn be considered in two different ways: verbal and non-verbal vocalizations. Non-verbal vocalizations—or the non-verbal portions of a verbal vocalization (the latter are called paralinguistic sounds)—include grunting, groaning, ranting, railing, murmuring, whispering, moaning, or the timbre, pitch, and rhythm of a vocalization. The seventeenth century reveals this category to be present for Euro-Americans, but valued in different ways than now. A continuum from nonverbal to verbal vocalizations located a person’s utterances outside, on the edges, or within one’s community, with such space constituted aurally, a public hearing rather than a public sphere. To Puritans, Native Americans and the wilderness howled from outside, a threat to the social order within. Quakers ranted, the latter an interesting term, as it meant, besides its present meaning of an incoherent speech that vents the passions, the half wild, half domesticated edge of a cultured field, a place to be watched carefully; for if left untended, the wild would take over. This construction of aural space had another dimension as well. Nonverbal groans and moans were heard in the spiritual world. Prayers were groaned. A woman’s groaning time—childbirth—was considered auspicious, and anything she said during the time a new soul was coming into the world was considered beyond doubt to be true. Questions of paternity were often held for just that moment. Early Americans paid close attention to the groans of the dying to interpret their passage into the next world.[[24]](#footnote-20)

### Speech

Finally comes speech, which the modern soundscape places at the highest position, more or less in a class by itself. Considering vocal yet nonverbal sound also makes it clear that orality is constructed of that part of speech which can be reduced to print. By the time we return to the spoken word, it has become obvious that there is much more to the soundscape than comprised by orality alone. Armed with the tools that open up the historicization of the rest of the soundscape, we can then return to orality as a legitimate, documented historical phenomenon that has a history of change and continuity over time. It should be clear by now that I am not calling for the dismissal of orality, rather I would like to see it historicized so that it no longer serves as a palliative for the primitive or savage.

## Not ironclad – denaturalize ours

This construction of the soundscape is not meant to be ironclad. It is intended more as a rubric, recognizable to most people once elucidated. Many of the sounds encountered fall under more than one category upon further consideration. Singing for example, gives an instrumental quality to the use of the voice, and although words are sung, the nonverbal aspects of song are at least as important as the verbal. Acoustic spaces are not merely instrumental, as most often they are shaped to control the sound of the voice, whether acoustical tiling to keep modern workplaces quiet, or the carefully designed reverberation qualities of an opera house. The rubric is useful to the extent that it is a starting point for unearthing historically constructed assumptions about how we hear. It gives us a frame for comparison with other times and places, and thus helps in the task of denaturalizing and historicizing our sense of hearing.

# McLuhanite Shift

## A wrench

The literate yet oral Puritans seem to throw a wrench in the McLuhanite theory. If sonic beliefs were still strong among them in the late seventeenth century, long after the invention of print, what caused the shift in the eighteenth century? McLuhan was not so far off. Rather than the printing press itself, or movable type, or individual acquisitions of literacy, the chief cause of the shift probably had more to do with mass print culture, a socially-driven society-wide saturation in which the whole society has been so imbued with print that even the illiterate were affected, so much so that it led to complex shifts in habits of perception. That happened in New England in the eighteenth century, with the increased output of the presses, the circulation of broadsides, and the arrival of newspapers, centuries after the invention of movable type. Newspapers and broadsides were often read aloud at meetinghouses, taverns, and other public spaces to give them a public hearing, a fact that underscores the complexity of the shift. Its trajectory was uneven, with a thousand local variants, inflected differently by race, region, religion, social position, gender roles, and a plethora of other social variables, and it was never absolute. So McLuhan might have a point, but the effects of the printing press took centuries rather than decades to unfold.

## The Intertwined complex: senses, enlightenment, print

The shift away from the audible world and toward the visual was intertwined with the rise of print culture, the early modern transformation, and the onset of the Enlightenment. This complex has generated a set of recurring questions concerning the roles of media, technology, and society. Was the shift away from the audible world socially driven? Driven by the innovations in media and technology? Or some middle path between the two? The implications go far beyond the early modern transformation, and are a chief concern of many of the authors now working on the history of sound and hearing.

## TD v. SD

A long-running debate has ensued between those arguing that all media have biases that shape how they are used (a particularly important point for sensory historians) and those emphasizing the precedence of human agency and social forces in making new media and technologies possible. The latter, calling themselves social constructionists, often misleadingly label the former technological determinists. Neither side denies that new technologies and new media open up new possibilities, or that social and other factors have been crucial to bringing about change, intended or otherwise. Straw arguments aside, the debate rests on two differences. The first, particularly important to the social constructionists, is the temporal order of events: Did social change create the conditions in which new media and technologies could emerge? Or did these new media and technologies create the conditions that made possible social changes like the early modern transformation? The second, more important to those emphasizing the role of new media and technology, concerns unintended consequences, with McLuhan uncharacteristically providing the voice of common sense. A proper understanding of the effects of media—which McLuhan claimed to be providing—could lead to better control of their intended and unintended effects, which in the past had caused major societal rifts, largely as a result of ignorance and incomprehension. Unconsciousness of *any* force is a disaster,” concluded McLuhan, “especially one we have made ourselves.[[25]](#footnote-21)

## Via Media

A middle way makes the most sense for sensory historians. What we are seeing are new human-led techniques and technologies emerging in tandem with social change. The two are co-articulated in a sort of feedback loop, each driving the other. Media do have sensory biases, but people, not technologies, make the changes that lead to new sensory practices. Yet without the new media the explorations would be impossible, especially in cases where no one originally intended the uses to which a particular medium is put. As Donna Haraway frames this middle way, “the machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment.” “Why should our bodies end at the skin,” she asks, proposing instead that we are all cyborgs, the “theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism.”[[26]](#footnote-22)

# Caveats

Second one is already covered!

Understanding this shift is crucial to the history of hearing, but a few caveats are in order. First, when discussing the history of the senses, both the production and reception of sensory stimuli need to be treated together. Integral as they are to each other, pulling them apart to treat one without considering the other will always distort the results. Second, we in the present are implicated in the historical process of sensory shift. There is no place of sensorial neutrality, outside of history. How do our present habits of perception shape the ways we perceive the past? At the same time it is also important to remember that perceptual habits are not immutable. Awareness of our own biases is a crucial first step in any attempt at a history of the senses.

## Senses all together

Third, we never went deaf and we never were blind, at least collectively. Sound, vision, and the other senses all remained in play, so thinking in absolutes is misleading. The rises and falls were relative and perhaps not quantifiable at all (though, as discussed below, there is value in counting). The only reason it makes sense to speak of something like a *ratio* of the senses is because of the role of attention, which acts as a filter on sensory data, letting some through to consciousness but not others. Cognitive scientists have established beyond a doubt that attention is limited to one or two things at a time at most. What we attend to can of course be multi-sensory, but when we attend more to sight, with reading being the obvious example, we tune out sounds and other sensory impressions not related to the task at hand, as anyone who has ever been startled by a sudden sound or a touch while reading deeply can verify. According to McLuhan, the case for a shift in the ratio of the senses comes precisely from the habitual and constant increase in taking information in through the eyes via reading that takes place in a culture inundated with print.

## Senses as zero sum

This leads to a final caveat, against the assumption that we can just add on more sensory data in an unlimited fashion. Attention is a zero sum game when it comes to sensory impressions. The tendency to ignore this limitation comes up most often in relation to new technologies or media. In order to attend to the extensions of the self that new media and technologies allow, something else must be sacrificed to prevent sensory overload. The fact that more attention to one thing leads to less toward another salvages the notion of a ratio of the senses being quantifiable in some way, but how? The senses are qualitatively different from each other. Perhaps they can be conceived of as being like complex numbers, which combine real with so-called imaginary numbers. Although equations cannot be solved for either a real or imaginary number when both are involved, complex numbers still produce useful results.

# Leftovers

“problems” of history of hearing

Inescapability of those histories

so what? Why bother with them?

Senses working all together

modernity

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Sidney Perley, *Historic Storms of New England* (Salem,, 1891), 68; Nathaniel Bradstreet Shurtleff, *Thunder & Lightning; and Deaths at Marshfield in 1658 and 1666* (Boston, 1850), i, 5-8, 10, 14, 37, 38, 51; Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents; Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791.*, 73 vols. (Cleveland, 1896-1901), 10: 194-97, 58: 278-79. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Hans Jonas, “The Nobility of Sight: A Study in the Phenomenology of the Senses,” in *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophy of Biology* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 135-156; David Michael Kleinberg-Levin, *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Kate Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. John Gyles, *Memoirs of the Odd Adventures and Strange Deliverances, Etc., in the Captivity of John Gyles* (Boston, 1736), 26; Richard Cullen Rath, *How Early America Sounded* (Ithaca, 2003), chapters 2 and 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
7. John Romeyn Brodhead, Berthold Fernow, and E. B. O'Callaghan, *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New-York*, 15 vols. (Albany, 1853-1887), 13: 102-03; Cadwallader Colden, *The History of the Five Indian Nations Depending on the Province of New-York in America* (<New York>, 1727), 89; Rath, *How Early America Sounded*, 168-72; Pastor Waldeck, "Diary," in *Hessian Manuscripts number 2* (1776-1781), 42b; [Conrad Weiser], *The Treaty Held with the Indians of the Six Nations, at Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in June, 1744* (Williamsburg, 1744), viii-ix. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
8. G. Peter Jemison, Anna M. Schein, and John Mohawk, *Treaty of Canandaigua 1794: 200 Years of Treaty Relations between the Iroquois Confederacy and the United States Chief Irving Powless, Jr., Paul Williams ... [Et Al.] ; Edited by G. Peter Jemison & Anna M. Schein ; Preface by John C. Mohawk ; Introduction by G. Peter Jemison ; Epilogue by Doug George-Kanentiio*, 1st ed ed. (Santa Fe, N.M., 2000); George C. Shattuck, *The Oneida Land Claims: A Legal History*, 1st ed., *The Iroquois and Their Neighbors* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1991). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
9. Rath, *How Early America Sounded*, 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
10. The best examples of this approach are to be found in Mark M. Smith, *How Race Is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses* (Chapel Hill, 2006); Mark M. Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
11. This approach is taken in Peter Charles Hoffer, *Sensory Worlds in Early America* (Baltimore, 2003). My reservations are spelled out in R. C. Rath, "Sensory Worlds in Early America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
12. R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World: Toward a Theory of Soundscape Design* (New York, 1977); Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 1st ed. (New York, 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
13. Richard C. Rath, "Drums and Power: Ways of Creolizing Music in Coastal South Carolina and Georgia, 1730-1790," in *Creolization in the Americas: Cultural Adaptations to the New World*, ed. Steven Reinhardt and David Buisseret (Arlinton, TX, 2000); Richard Cullen Rath, "African Music in Seventeenth-Century Jamaica: Cultural Transit and Transition," *William and Mary Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (1993). An extensive literature on the meanings of African American music and speech during the nineteenth century is ably brought together in Shane White and Graham J. White, *The Sounds of Slavery: Discovering African American History through Songs, Sermons, and Speech* (Boston, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
14. Salikoko S. Mufwene, *African-American English: Structure, History, and Use* (London ; New York, 1998); John R. Rickford, *African American Vernacular English: Features, Evolution, Educational Implications*, *Language in Society ; 26.* (Malden, Mass., 1999); White and White, *The Sounds of Slavery: Discovering African American History through Songs, Sermons, and Speech*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
15. Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill, 1996); Jane Neill Kamensky, *Governing the Tongue: The Politics of Speech in Early New England* (Oxford, 1998); Mary Beth Norton, *Founding Mothers & Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society*, 1st ed. (New York, 1996); 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). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
16. Veit Erlmann, *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening, and Modernity* (Oxford and New York, 2004); Lisa Gitelman, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines: Representing Technology in the Edison Era* (Stanford, Calif., 1999); Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Cambridge, Mass. ; London, 1999); Douglas Kahn and Gregory Whitehead, eds., *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992); John M. Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes* (New York, 2003); Rath, *How Early America Sounded*; Elena Razlogova, *The Listener's Voice: A Story of Radio, Reciprocity, and Greed in America* (Philadelphia, forthcoming ); Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000); Bruce R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor* (Chicago, 1999); Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America*; Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, 2003); Emily Ann Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900-1933* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002); White and White, *The Sounds of Slavery: Discovering African American History through Songs, Sermons, and Speech*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
17. Lucien Paul Victor Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century, the Religion of Rabelais* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982); Lucien Paul Victor Febvre and Henri Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing 1450-1800*, new ed., *Foundations of History Library* (London, 1976); Harold Innis, *The Bias of Communication* (Toronto, 1951); Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (New York, 1962). Martin Jay documents the “ocularcentrism” of the Enlightenment but is not concerned with orality, literacy, or a shift in the senses. See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley, 1993). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
18. In its present incarnation, the literacy hypothesis can be traced largely to McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*. Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge, 1977); Jack Goody and Ian Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5, no. 3 (1963); Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, ed. Terence Hawkes, *New Accents* (London ; New York, 1982). Sam Gill has pointed out the problems with the term “pre-literate” in Sam D. Gill, *Beyond the Primitive : The Religions of Nonliterate Peoples*, *Prentice-Hall Series in World Religions* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1982). His alternative, “non-literate,” still defines people only in reference to literacy. “Traditional” as an alternative has its own set of problems. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
19. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* ([Chicago], 1966); Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and Lilian A. Clare, *Primitive Mentality* (London,

    New York,, 1923). For a rebuttal of the concrete/oral formulation see Carol Fleischer Feldman, "Oral Metalanguage," in *Orality and Literacy*, ed. David R. Olson and Nancy Torrance (Cambridge, 1991), 47-65. For a concise review and criticism of the notion of the oral/primitive/savage mind and its contrastive association with literacy and “civilization,” particularly as it relates to colonial North America, see Francis Jennings, *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest* (New York, 1975), 6-12, 15-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
20. James Axtell, *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America* (Oxford, 1985), 14–15, 338 n. 27 (which cites Ong and Goody); Daniel K. Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse: The Peoples of the Iroquois League in the Era of European Colonization* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1992), 46–47, 307–8 n. 36 (which cites Axtell); Michael G. Kammen, *Colonial New York: A History* (New York, 1975), 96–97, 121–22; Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1983), 98, 121–31, 373 n. 12, 377 n. 8; Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1980), 190; Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York, 1987), 268–69 n. 10; Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge Is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700–1865* (New York, 1989); Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), 11–12, 27–28. Brown and Warner both rely on Isaac, who builds his notion of orality from Ong and Goody. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
21. Charles Morton, "Compendium Physicae," *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts* 33 (1940); Charles Morton, "Compendium Physicae," ( American Antiquarian Society, Mss. Dept., Octavo vols. "M," c. 1700). These and many more examples are discussed in Rath, *How Early America Sounded*, 10-26, 195 n. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
22. Rath, *How Early America Sounded*, 26-38. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
23. Ibid., 43-119. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
24. Ibid., 120-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
25. McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 124, 183, 249. For a detailed and balanced overview of debates surrounding social constructionism and technological determinism, see Daniel Chandler, *Technological or Media Determinism* (1996), http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/tecdet/tecdet.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
26. Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York, 1991), 149-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)