

Barbara Lorenzkowski. 2010. *Sounds of Ethnicity. Listening to German North America 1850–1914*. Winnipeg:University of Manitoba Press.

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Tuning in to German North America:Performing German Ethnicity 1850–1914

Barbara Lorenzkowski provides the following description of Waterloo County soundscape on May 2, 1871:

The [1871 peace] jubilee was ushered in by a salute of twenty–one cannon shots...As exuberant as the speeches were the ten thousand celebrants who clapped enthusiastically when an oak was planted...With revelers singing German songs and loudly cheering at portraits of Emperor Wilhelm I., the celebrations culminated in a fireworks display. (2010:128f.)

In her seminal work on the sound of German ethnicity in the Great Lakes region in the six decades prior to World War I, Lorenzkowski adds an important aural dimension to the historiography of German culture in North America. By studying past sounds of rural Waterloo County, Ontario and industrialized urban Buffalo, New York, she allows her readers to tune in to the public and private worlds of German migrants and their self–declared leaders as they practiced and performed their ethnic consciousness in the transnational borderland of the Great Lakes region.

How can our understanding of the past be deepened by the study of its sounds? Hearing is a process of perceiving the world and contributes to our daily acquisition of knowledge. “[K]nowing the world through sound,” as Bruce Smith suggests, “is fundamentally different from knowing the world through vision” (2003:4). This notion can—and should—be applied to academic research; indeed, several disciplines, history included, have been experiencing a “sonic turn.” In *Hearing History*, sensory historian Mark M. Smith writes about the increasing focus on the aural in historical research: “This intensification holds out to the prospect of helping to redirect in some profoundly important ways what is often the visually oriented discipline of history, a discipline replete with emphases on the search for

‘perspective’ and ‘focus’ through the ‘lens’ of evidence, one heavily, if often unthinkingly, indebted to the visualism of ‘Enlightenment’ thinking and ways of understanding the word” (2004:ix).

This review concentrates on the aural aspects of narrating the past, which holds one seat at the table of what Smith terms “Sensory History,” which is not a field within the traditional discipline of history, but rather, a certain “habit” in “thinking about the past” (2007:4). This habit, Smith continues, has emerged from a number of distinct traditional disciplines and remains open to members of an even greater variety. Smith’s comparisons to “Women’s History” and “African American History” attest to the high potential of Sensory History: “What are usually considered historical ‘fields’ of inquiry—diplomatic, gender, race, regional, borderlands, cultural, political, military, and so on,” argues Smith, “could all be written and researched through the habit of sensory history” (2007:5).

Sound Studies is one such transdisciplinary “habit” within Sensory History. In “Onwards to an Audible Past,” Smith predicts a bright future for Sound Studies:

My hope is that questions of sound, noise and aurality will not just infiltrate historical narratives but also change the very conceptualization of historical thinking and problems. Should that occur, history will regain its full texture, invite new questions, and take us beyond an unwitting commitment to seeing the past. Ideally, we will begin to contextualize the past within the larger rubric of all senses and thus free mainstream historical writing from the powerful but blinding focus of vision alone. (2004:xxi)

Historian Lorenzkowski presents an excellent example of Sound Studies by concentrating on the aural worlds of German North America. As with visual elements such as architecture or costume, the various sonic elements of a space (and with it its keynotes, sound marks, and sound events) can reveal a group’s identity. It would have been easy to subsume all German immigrants under one ethnic group, but Lorenzkowski knows better: following Rogers Brubaker, she does not attempt to isolate German ethnicity as a group that she studies, but conceives ethnicity as an event comprising “everyday encounters, practical categories, commonsense knowledge, cultural idioms, cognitive schemas, interactional cues, discursive frames, organizational routines, social networks, and institutional forms” (Lorenzkowski 2010:6). She analyzes the ethnopolitical missions of newspaper editors, school curricula, and singers’ festivals, and follows individuals through their diary entries into their private lives. And while she does not deny that visual aspects played an important role in the performance of German ethnicity, Lorenzkowski’s approach to historical analysis is decidedly through sound.

### Listening to German Ethnicity

The extensive and pleasantly readable introduction takes the readers to the Great Lakes region in the mid-nineteenth century, an area characterized by transcultural exchanges through transatlantic immigration and transnational border crossings. German was prominently featured on the streets; according to Lorenzkowski's research, in 1871 55% of Waterloo's population of 40,252 was of German cultural origin with the highest concentration (73%) in Berlin. German immigration to Buffalo, the city across the border, started after the famine in 1817 and continued until the late thirties of the nineteenth century. The city, according to historian David Gerber (cited by Lorenzkowski), "had more Bavarians than any other American city, and more Southern Germans than such equally significant centres as St. Louis, Chicago and New York" (2010:15). In 1855 39% of household heads were born on German land, sharing this multicultural city with people of Irish (18%), Canadian (12%), French (5%), and US-American (25%) descent. In the beginning, the German language was the ticket of admission to membership in this community and self-declared gatekeepers of German ethnicity made it their life task to preserve German language and culture. This public line was not always in accordance with domestic reality; the two main parts of the book, "Language Matters" and "Music Matters," deal with varied patterns of German ethnicity in North America that were constantly in flux. Here the focus is on two major subfields of Sound Studies: language and music, although with the latter Lorenzkowski mostly means song instead of music in general. Each chapter is well suited to be assigned as a class reading.

Chapter 1, "Territories of Translation," one of many alliterative chapter titles, investigates language practices of the first and second generation of German-Canadians who negotiated life in two cultures by negotiating life in two languages. Self-declared "ethnic leaders" (such as the editors of the widely read German-language newspaper *Berliner Journal*) saw themselves in the tradition of Johann Gottfried von Herder and Johann Gottlieb von Fichte (the latter with a decidedly nationalistic agenda) and tried to impose their mission of "ethnic unity und linguistic purity" (2010:25) onto German migrants from above. Germanness, they reminded the family heads, had to be seeded and cultivated at home, through efforts such as conversing solely in German and eating German "nourishing rye bread, of course" (2010:31). Yet the private reality was often in contradiction with such ideals as many young German-Canadians emphatically embraced their new home, and even when their German accent was detected and they were asked to continue a conversation in German, they insisted on using English or a hybrid of the

two languages. In the eyes of the newspaper editors, Lorenzkowski states, “these fools had entered cultural wasteland” (2010:34).

In the mid-1880s, an anonymous writer published eight articles in which he bemoaned the decline of the German language in Waterloo County. Even though such accusations have always existed in bilingual communities (in Germany as well, especially today!), these contributions point to another fact: the written and the spoken versions of the language were already divorced from one another. While standard written German had become the lingua franca for German migrants (some of whom could neither understand Bavarian nor Swabian), the spoken language not only reflected different German accents or dialects, but was in phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexis essentially a hybrid. Here Lorenzkowski offers a rich array of examples for linguistic hybrids such as “Ein Bottlefiller muss Bottlen und Labeln koennen” (2010:37; “a bottlefiller has to know how to bottle and label”). It would have been useful if Lorenzkowski had explored the trend of incorporating English nouns and verbs into the German syntax, but granted, she never claims to be a linguist.

The ethnic gatekeepers, however, demanded that all German-Canadians and German-Americans learn their native tongue—and by native tongue, they had come to mean not necessarily the German of their parents, but a pure, grammatically correct Standard German, the language of Germany’s *Dichter* and *Denker* (poets and thinkers). German was no longer an emotional souvenir from a time long gone, but now was constructed to promise “entrance into the world of higher learning, the arts and sciences, and offered practical benefits as a language of trade and community” (2010:43).

In her second chapter, “Languages of Ethnicity,” Lorenzkowski tells the story of German language instruction at Waterloo County’s schools. 1871 had marked Germany’s victory over France and the proclamation of the nation state. Yet for young children in Waterloo County, the year had an additional significance: Since the School Act of 1871, all kids between the ages of 7 and 12 had to attend school. In the same year, the county’s newly appointed school inspector banned German as the language of instruction and discouraged the teaching of German in public schools, even though more than 50 percent of all children, sometimes even 100 percent, only started English when entering the school system. Three decades later, protests erupted as the powerful German-Canadian social elites of Waterloo County demanded German in the schools’ curricula. Most parents did not see the need for German instruction at school as their children already spoke German at home—learning English ensured their membership in the German-English world. What’s more, an increasingly large number of German-Canadian parents chose to speak English at home. Yet the German School Association, with its members largely stemming from middle and

upper classes, successfully campaigned against the school inspector. Starting in March 1903, each of Berlin's four elementary schools received a classroom for German language use. Shortly thereafter, two full-time German teachers were hired to serve all four elementary schools and German was properly reintegrated into the curriculum. With the beginning of World War I, German language instruction was removed once again. Lorenzkowski concludes this chapter by explaining that introducing Standard German into the curriculum from above did not strengthen German ethnicity in Waterloo County, but was indeed too rigid and elitist for the majority of those whom it affected. The majority of German-Canadians continued speaking pidgin German in public and private life, proving that they could perform Germanness through an English-German hybrid language.

Chapter 3, "Speaking Modern," chronicles the construction of German in Buffalo's schools from being a language of ethnicity to a modern language. Lorenzkowski describes "ethnic chauvinism" and provides examples of elitist outlets such as the *Demokrat* and the *Amerikanische Schulzeitung* which denigrated both the Celtic language and those of Slavic descent ("even the roughest Germans were preferable to the best Slavs", 2010:90). All the while, ethnic leaders explained that the German language with its "cultural importance or commercial value for Americans" (2010:90) should be taught as it was a "special gift to the world" (2010:89).

Looking behind the scenes of this perceptual shift from above, Lorenzkowski shows how the organization *Lehrerbund* partnered up with the Modern Language Association, the National Education Association, and Buffalo's superintendent of the German Department. Joining forces, the team set out to change the American school curriculum but ended up concentrating on changing German language pedagogy in particular and foreign language pedagogy in general. Two models of language teaching could be observed: grammar translation and the communicative approach ("the natural method", 2010:92). The debate became not whether German had its place at school but *how* it should be taught. With this, Buffalo was on the vanguard of foreign language pedagogy in the US in the 1890s. According to an 1894 publication by the National Education Association, studying modern languages

will train their [children's] memory and develop their sense of accuracy; it will quicken and strengthen their reasoning powers by offering them at every step problems that must be solved by the correct application of the results of their own observations; it will help them to understand the structure of the English sentence and the real meaning of English words; it will broaden their minds by revealing to them modes of thought and expression different from those to which they have been accustomed. (2010:94)

In an essay in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2012, nearly 120 years later, foreign language advocate Michael Geisler writes: foreign language learning

improves scores in math and language arts, verbal skills (in the foreign language *and* in English!), it tends to improve SAT scores, it is positively correlated with higher performance in college, it improves memory and, at the other end of our lifelong learning trajectory, it helps offset age-related memory loss. We also know that students who have acquired a foreign language (or two) tend to be more successful problem solvers (since they have had to learn how to look at any given issue from multiple perspectives). (Geisler 2012)

As one can see, the arguments have not changed since the nineteenth century in North America. Learning foreign languages has even more benefits than those stated here, yet foreign-language advocates must still justify themselves to the monolingually oriented public school curriculum.

After three chapters on the sound of language, in the second half of her book, Lorenzkowski switches gears and considers the sound of music. In *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Jacques Attali writes: “Now we must learn to judge a society more by its sounds, by its art, and by its festivals, than by its statistics” (Attali 1985:10). Language is open for those who speak it—occasionally a small circle. Music, as many argue, is a universal language open to all who perceive it. Chapter 4, “Tunes of Community, Melodies of Race,” feeds off of this notion as singing was not only a means of mass entertainment but more importantly allowed for the public display of German ethnicity for those who spoke German as well as for those who did not. Yet for an 18-page long chapter with “Race” in its title, the actual section on race is surprisingly short and does not fulfill the high expectations the reader had before reading this chapter. In only a bit more than four pages, Lorenzkowski describes the racial discourse of the time in the context of immigration. The *Commercial Advertiser* encouraged America’s “fair-haired Saxons” (2010:120) to mingle with the “Teutonic race” as the latter stood for “industry, order, and respectability” (119), which was far more desirable than the “dirty, ragged, dark, and choleric Celt” (2010:117). The Buffalo *Sängerfest* was seen as a perfect meeting place for non-Germans to make connections with German-Americans. While the discourse on Black Irish is an interesting addition, the material presented here is not inquisitive enough to warrant the chapter title. The topic of race is also absent from the chapter’s conclusion.

Lorenzkowski’s examinations of national discourse are more penetrating. In the eighteenth century, constructions of a German nation merely referred to the German language in its spoken and written manifestations: although there was no nation state at hand, the land of the *Dichter* and *Denker* had its

own national literature from which to derive national feelings. The early nineteenth century brings a national sound into the game as many *Liedertafeln*, choirs, and singing clubs formed in Germany and shortly thereafter in German North America. Lorenzkowski concentrates on the perception of the 1860's *Sängerfest* in Buffalo, which, with over 500 singers, was the biggest pre-Civil War festival of song in the US. While the German-language newspaper *Demokrat* was critical about the performances, the overwhelming majority of English-language newspapers received it as, in Lorenzkowski's words, an "earth-shattering event" (2010:114). It is important to mention that Lorenzkowski does not demonstrate this to be a nationalistic event. Ernst Moritz Arndt's "Was ist des Deutschen Vaterland?" and Hoffmann von Fallersleben's "Deutschlandlied" were not observed to be sung, although they had existed since 1813 and 1841 respectively. The emphasis was on German ethnicity, created through song and *Gemütlichkeit*—"that amalgam of conviviality, social harmony, casual socializing, exuberance, and group feeling that is impossible to translate and yet represents a key element of German chorus culture" (2010:122). This *Gemütlichkeit* both enwombed German immigrants as well as non-German speaking singers and visitors. In fact, Lorenzkowski writes: "By the turn of the century, they [English-speaking audiences] had claimed the singers' festivals as 'ours'" (2010:214).

Chapter 5, "Germania in America," begins with the German North American soundscape over three days in May of 1871, when the victory over France and the end of the Franco-Prussian war was celebrated in Berlin, Ontario. Sound events consisted, as mentioned in the first paragraph of this review, of cannon shots, speeches, applause, cheers, singing, and fireworks. This spectacle and "audacle"—i.e., an aural spectacle—displayed German unity in sight and sound, yet Lorenzkowski also illustrates how German-Canadians' identity started to become distinguished from German-Americans' identity. Many of those who had left Germany for the US after the failed German revolutions of 1848/9 quickly realized that the victory over France could not be equated with freedom and civic liberty. They remained critical of the mighty Bismarck and his powerful Prussia, which aligned them more closely with the politics of their new chosen home. They encouraged their fellow German immigrants to, in the words of Francis Brunck, "preserve, with all our might, the Republic in North America" (Lorenzkowski 2010:145). Just across the Lake in Waterloo County, Canadians did not question the German immigrants' loyalty to their new or old home—German immigration had its own place in the nation building of Canada; Lorenzkowski states that it was undisputed in Canada that the "cultural norm was German, not British" (2010:148). It certainly helped that German-Canadians acknowledged the British Empire and celebrated

Queen Victoria's birthday alongside that of Wilhelm I.

Chapters 6 and 7, "Soundscapes of Identity" and "Making a Musical Public," go back to the creation of German ethnicity through song by visiting the eight singers' festivals in Waterloo County which—inspired by the 1871 peace jubilee—took place from 1874 to 1912. "Making music", as Lorenzkowski argues, "was a trans-ethnic venture in which the hyphen in 'German-Canadian' symbolized not an imposing cultural boundary that shielded German folklore from the outside world, but rather a space of cultural interaction" (2010:188). What makes these festivals an interesting study is that they were both homegrown small-town events that nonetheless foregrounded the transnational (and not transatlantic) divide.

Discussing negotiations between "fine music" singers' festivals and the establishment of large German *Fests* in Buffalo, Lorenzkowski strolls through the grounds of the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo in 1901. The German Empire had sponsored the erection of Alt-Nürnberg, a town square bordered by several medieval looking buildings, with brass players on the streets and plenty of beer available for their visitors. In short: German ethnicity was here not only equated with but also publicly performed as Bavaria.

These last two chapters fall a bit short in comparison to the outstanding first five chapters. Both are overly celebratory in that they only describe these events as successes. Additionally, the format is inconsistent. Almost every chapter ends with a "Conclusion" to touch upon the most important points; unfortunately, two chapters (including chapter 7) do not include conclusions which makes for a somewhat asymmetrical format.

## Sound Studies Revisited

In "Is There a Field Called Sound Culture Studies? And Does It Matter?" Michele Hilmes describes Sound Studies as an "emerging field" that, for more than 100 years, has been "always emerging, never emerged" (Hilmes 2005:249). She suggests that there are not enough scholars or an enthusiastic audience. A different—and all the more interesting—proposition is her comparison of the relationship between scholars of Sound and of Visual Studies with that of ear and eye: the first is "constantly subjugated to the primacy of the visual, associated with emotion and subjectivity as against objectivity and rationality of vision, seen as somehow more 'natural' and less constructed as a mode of communication" (2005:249).

Another reason for Sound Studies not yet having fully emerged is the scarcity, for events during the time period Lorenzkowski studies, of audio recordings relative to visual footage. Sound recording only came about in 1860 (Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville's *Phonograph* without a

play-back option) or 1877 (Edison's *Phonograph*), and these devices were not available to the masses until more than a decade later. The Library of Congress has many (silent) video clips of the Pan-Am in its collection, yet audio files are missing—even the welcome speech of President McKinley (his last public speech before his assassination a day later) is only available as a silent film. Lorenzkowski overcomes the obstacle posed by this lack of audio sources by basing her writing on sound upon written sources: she examines visual documents, admittedly an impressive variety, for her excellent portrait of the sounds of the past. Yet I wonder if Lorenzkowski could have found sound recordings of the later festivals, recordings of German-American and German-Canadian bands, and choirs, as their examinations would have enriched this study. I am also curious about other German-American or German-Canadian sounds outside of language and music: did the German experience differ acoustically from other immigrant experiences? An aural investigation into the German workforce, extra-musical pastime activities, religious rituals, etc. would add to our understanding of the sound of German ethnicity in the Great Lakes region.

Lorenzkowski writes about sound using many visual metaphors such as “fireworks *displays*.” A scholar on language and sound should have addressed this in the introduction. At the same time, this shows that visual metaphors abound in English, as Western culture is visually oriented and the use of metaphors, i.e. language, is an expression of that culture. But it is even more complicated: to concentrate on hearing instead of on seeing alone, does not mean to simply exchange visual metaphors for vocabulary from the aural realm. No, one has to consider new “habits” and rethink one’s own cultural practices. Barbara Lorenzkowski’s book is a gripping tale of the performance of German ethnicity through sound at a time when German identity was in flux in North America and abroad. By illustrating how history can be investigated through acoustic experiences, *The Sounds of Ethnicity* is an important contribution to scholarship in History, German Studies, and Sound Studies.

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