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# Infernal Sound Cues: Aural Geographies and the Politics of Noise

BETH MESZAROS

Every time Hamlet dies, “the world,” as Shakespearian scholar Wes Folkert puts it, “fills up again with sound [...] To hear, Hamlet tells us with his final breath, is what it is to be alive” (119). While that sentiment would be rightly and hotly contested by the Deaf community, it strikes those of us who can hear and who have no experience of Deaf culture as axiomatic. In his study of the “sonic landscapes” of Robert Ashley, Arthur J. Sabatini valorizes sound as “ultimately, the more dominant phenomenon in the context of the theatre experience [...]” (343). One need not go this far, however, to advance the claim that despite the tyranny of the gaze in the society of the spectacle, the materiality of the ear, as acoustic agent, is still maintained by the language of the theatre: actors still audition, and the space of an auditorium is inhabited by an audience that listens as much as watches.

Dramatists who are especially attentive listeners reproduce the soundtracks of their contemporary culture and embed them within the spatial landscapes of their plays. The playwrights to be considered here – Edward Bond, Alex Jones, Stephen Poliakoff, and Jim Cartwright – demonstrate a particularly keen ear, a heightened awareness of the interplay of soundscape and human figure. As will become apparent, this dynamic is political, indirectly determined by the construction of social class. In other words, the aural characteristics of the urban environment are traceable to certain physical properties of the urban slum – overcrowding and shoddy housing, for example. There is nothing new here, one could argue: one need merely read Ben Jonson’s *Epicoene* (a noisy play, indeed) to get some sense of the din produced by early modern London. The salient difference between the soundscapes of Bond, Jones, Poliakoff, and Cartwright and that of Ben Jonson is attributable to the cheap availability and propagation of audio-electronic sound.

## MAKING SENSE OF/WITH SOUND

Before we attend to these specific theatrical soundscapes, however, we need to understand how and why the aural environment of the urban poor has become so toxic. Since sound is vital to making sense of space (Diane Ackerman points out that there is a “geographical quality to listening” [178]), soundscapes that frustrate the human attempt to get one’s bearings can be said to be undecipherable, sometimes even to the point of toxicity. Acoustemologists refer to such overpopulated sonic environments as “polluted.” Acoustemologist R. Murray Schafer explains that “individual signals are obscured in an over-dense population of sounds. [...] [T]here is cross-talk on all channels, and in order for the most ordinary sounds to be heard, they must be increasingly amplified” (43). This over-density (referred to as “low-fidelity” sound) is most likely to occur in urban landscapes because the architecture and configuration of the modern city creates the so-called canyon effect. In his study of the perception of auditory events, Stephen Handel argues that cities are noisier in part because they provide more reflective surfaces, rather than because they are noisier *per se* (80). As Handel claims, multiple, non-absorbent reflective surfaces arranged in horizontal rows (as along city streets) or vertical rows (as in tall buildings) create extra sound paths, the result being that sounds become amplified and more penetrating (80–81). Worse still, in urban areas populated by the poor, the cheaper materials used for housing construction tend to provide poor sound absorption. Increasingly, the effect on these inhabitants is a kind of “aural claustrophobia” (Truax, *Acoustic Communication* 62).

## THE GEOPATHOLOGY OF NOISE

Although it is routinely observed by the medical community that high decibel sound can cause “headaches, nausea, [...] impaired cardiovascular [...] and respiratory function,” and eventual deafness (Schafer 184), there is less consensus about the specific socio-psychological effects of noise. Some environmental psychologists claim that any sound that is deemed “noise” (that is, unwanted sound) by a listener can become a stressor, regardless of its actual volume. There *is* agreement that a listener’s inability to control his or her sonic environment tends to provoke irritability and belligerence in a person who is already distressed by other features of that environment. Along with an increased level of aggressivity, populations that inhabit “acoustically oppressive environment[s]” (Truax, *Acoustic Communication* 62) come to manifest a decreased ability to handle cognitive tasks. When background sound is lo-fi, that is, characterized by a wide band of signal frequencies and volumes, the brain is taxed by the need to screen out unwanted signals (Truax, *Acoustic Communication*

23). This overload condition is registered by the colloquial expression, “I can’t hear myself think.” Thus, acoustically polluted landscapes can render their inhabitants inattentive, distracted, heedless, and, in some cases, hostile, even violent. In such acoustic communities, “sonic one-upmanship” becomes the norm: first, one has to shout to be heard; second, latent irritability manifests itself in shouting; and third, the production of (more) noise is frequently the only means by which the powerless *can* exert power (Reed 23). Western culture has long equated power with loudness, even if that power is founded on illusion. “Without the loudspeaker,” wrote Hitler in 1938, “we would never have conquered Germany” (qtd. in Attali 87). Today, the ghetto boom-box can be said to be the aural icon of economic and political powerlessness. In any case, the result is an escalating spiral of noise produced by the community itself: as Vicki Reed argues, such a community is “annoying itself” (22).

When we tune in to the soundscapes produced by Bond, Jones, Poliakoff, and Cartwright, we hear acoustic communities that are indeed annoying themselves, even making themselves ill. The privation of these urban canyon dwellers is conveyed not only in semiotically conventional terms (threadbare clothing, dirt, flimsy furniture, mismatched decor, etc.) but equally in an unrelenting soundtrack of nerve-fraying noise. The “geopathic disorders,” which, as Chaudhuri explains in a spatial context, are “the suffering[s] caused by one’s location” (58), manifest themselves in these urban landscapes through sound as much as place. The “geopathic disorders” that erupt are responses to bone-jarring, soul-rattling vibrations, vibrations to be literally understood. In such contexts, “noise” is noisome – toxic and nauseating. If we lower the volume on the spoken script “channel” and instead tune in to the music, noise, and paralinguage that are produced and processed in these acoustically oppressive environments, we begin to hear the excruciating orchestrations of an unemployment culture. As Folkerth claims of Shakespeare’s dramaturgy, such plays beg to be heard as much as read or seen.

#### ACOUSTIC COMMUNITIES OF THE URBAN POOR

In 1965, Edward Bond’s *Saved* exploded onto the already turbulent London theatre scene, setting off a furor that remained unmatched until the Royal Court production of Sarah Kane’s *Blasted* in 1995. The fiercely uncompromising portrayal of London ghetto life in *Saved* left contemporary observers stunned and revolted. Today, the play is considered one of Bond’s finest and has garnered much critical attention. None of the commentary on it, however, takes more than cursory note of its aural dimensions. Read with an attentive ear, *Saved* registers the daily torture of being bombarded by unendurable noise.

At the core of *Saved* is the wail of a baby in acute distress. The other noises of the play orbit this centralized squalling. The baby’s cries serve only to generate more noise – quarrels about why it is crying and what would serve to

make it stop. This is a world “crowded with acoustic disturbances” (Folkert 109) and acoustic distortion. The baby’s mother, Pam, never manages to get her radio tuned properly – it emits nothing but incomprehensible static. And it is one of the many ironies of the play that one of the longest and loudest arguments erupts out of Pam’s inability to locate her weekly copy of *Radio Times*, as if a level of purposeful, selective listening were even possible amid the din.<sup>1</sup> In the noise-polluted world of *Saved*, “Why don’t yer shut that kid up?” (47) is merely a rhetorical question. Amid the ruckus of *Saved*, the healthy, normal response of a newborn to acute distress is distorted into a harrowing leitmotif, and a lullaby is the overture to violence. The appalling fact of *Saved* is that the infant’s sobs evoke not pity, but annoyance. Its mother neglects it because she “ain’ sittin’ there with that row goin’ on” (51). Later on, the infamous pram scene demonstrates how aurality can run counter to visuality. The blue balloon tied to the baby carriage misleads the audience into believing that Pam has suddenly got motherhood the way some people get religion. However, the baby’s uncharacteristic silence conveys the true state of affairs: this is not the silence of contentment but the silence of stupor. Pam has liberally dosed the baby with aspirin to keep it quiet. The resulting hush will, in turn, be followed by the silence of *kindermord*.

The only listener in the play is Len, but the quality and purpose of his listening is highly suspect. In her study of Bond’s dramatic strategies, Jenny Spencer notices Len’s propensity for eavesdropping (Spencer 33). Len, like Desdemona, manifests a “greedy ear” (*Oth.* 1.3.149; 400). From the beginning, he establishes himself as a practitioner of aural surveillance. In the play’s first scene, it is he who tenses as he hears Harry’s movements in the house, whereas Pam hears nothing. Later on, as Spencer points out (33), he deliberately lets Fred know that he has listened in as Fred and Pam made love in the room below his. Scene twelve finds Len prone on the floor, one ear pressed to the floorboards so that he can monitor whether Pam and a lover are “on the bash” (Bond 63). Listening, as Len practices it, is either for prurient or intelligence-gathering purposes – or both.

As for the judicial “hearing” in the play, Fred’s trial and conviction for his role in the murder, the ability of the ear of justice to sound out the evidence is compromised even before the crime is committed. Pete, one of Fred’s cronies, recounts *his* earlier court adventure for his buddies, smug in the knowledge that he has put one over: he’s doubly pleased that he’s been paid to testify and that the “coroner-twit” has apologized for “troublin’” him (Bond 38). Later, after Fred has been arrested, it becomes clear that the true story of how a baby came to be stoned to death will never be heard.

The final scene of *Saved* transpires in an indeterminate silence that seems to be more akin to what Stanton B. Garner Jr. calls “perceptual blankness” (163). In auditory terms, the dramaturgy seems a rough approximation of what audiologists call a “temporary threshold shift,” or temporary deafness occasioned

by subjection to high-decibel, low-frequency sound (Truax, *Handbook*). Some observers have argued that Len's mending of the broken chair signifies reconstruction, and so the hush of this scene has been construed as recuperative. I would argue that the dead calm is merely the obligatory pause before the soundtrack loops back and replays itself and that the chair is being mended only that it may be broken again; in fact, the percussive hammering and pounding that accompanies the repair is an acoustic signal that merely accents the leaden, uneasy quiet.

*Saved* leaves little or nothing in the way of a quiet zone either for the characters or the audience, even though Bond does resolutely maintain the proscenium barrier. As W.B. Worthen observes, "[T]he play reifies the proscenium as an instance of the more insistent boundaries of class" (98). However, the audience of *Saved* does get quite an earful of slum living. While the landscape itself may be sealed off, the sounds of that landscape penetrate the audience's space as well as the individual bodies inhabiting that space.

Alex Jones' *Noise* (1997) is clearly indebted to Bond's *Saved*. As one reviewer of the play's American premier production noted, "With a nod to Edward Bond's *Saved*, Brit playwright Alex Jones has crafted a kitchen-sink drama with a techno beat" (Ross). Taking full advantage of thirty years' worth of electronic advances in the production of amplified sound, the play pummels both audience and characters with an in-yer-ears soundtrack of deafening, hard-driving techno music.<sup>2</sup>

The entire action of the play transpires within the tiny flat rented by teenaged newlyweds Dan and seven-months-pregnant Becky. Thrilled to be in their own place at last, the two don't even realize their own desperate poverty and fragility. Dan is delighted by the gurgle of amniotic fluid as he presses his ear against Becky's stomach. As they clink teacups, toasting themselves, their new home, and their little one to be, their domestic tranquility is disturbed by a driving beat rhythm emanating from the flat next door. "Cue the music!" chuckles Dan (17). But the joke soon wears thin. As the days go by, their love nest is repeatedly invaded at all hours of the day and night by raucous music. At first, the two are inclined to be forgiving, remembering with some ruefulness their own noisy adolescent escapades: "Remember some of the parties we've had at Cassie's – till dawn sometimes" (20). In time, however, the two become sleep-deprived, jittery, and demoralized. Downscale Becky and Dan have no means of blocking out the noise. The walls "are like paper" (43). They are too poor to afford a phone; the nearest phone with which to call the police is in the local McDonald's and, like everything else in the world of *Noise*, "it's always bust" (70). Finally, after some days and nights of sleepless torture, driven to distraction, Dan approaches the perpetrator, hoping to settle the matter civilly.

At this point, Jones begins to make explicit the latent connection between noise and violence. Matt, the source of the racket, responds to Dan's modest request with deranged fury: "I was reasonable, honest," Dan tells Becky, "but

he just went crazy, y' know, jabbin' his finger, that sort of stuff. Said he'd rip me fuckin' 'ead off; that sort of stuff. So I just sort of left it – walked away" (36). Later, after Dan has complained to the Housing Council, Matt manages to convince naïve Becky, home alone, to let him in just "t' talk." He explains to Becky that he turns up the volume "t' fill an empty space" (42) and because he has "no money, nothin' t' do" (44). During the conversation, Matt's language and tone grow increasingly aggressive. "[L]ife's shit when it cums down to it" (45), he sneers in counterpoint to Becky's cheerful patter about the joy of babies and grass and trees. Finally, Matt, as if about to leave, instead attempts to rape Becky, forcing her onto the bed and mauling her. When she resists, sobbing hysterically, he becomes disgusted and gives up: "I cum round 'ere t' mek peace [...] you piss me around all afternoon, gerrin' me all worked up – then start all this shit! [...] Fuck you! [...] An' from now on I play mar fuckin' music when I like an' as loud as I like – get it? (58–59).

As in *Saved*, babies don't fare very well in *Noise* either. Becky's baby doesn't even manage to get itself born. Matt, who "can't stand the sound of cryin' babbies," sees to that (43). In the fierce climax of the play, Matt, furious that Dan has been pounding on the wall, manages to invade Dan and Becky's home one last time. He beats Dan, then pummels Becky, pulling a knife on her, threatening to "slice [her] open like a chicken an' see what color" her baby is (77). The about-to-be born is about-to-be-buried as Matt demolishes the baby cot. Small wonder Becky miscarries. Matt has no ears for Dan's pleas for mercy: "[N]obody cares anymore, ay yer noticed? [...] we 'm all on our own now: with nuthin' but a sound system t' drown the space between the walls. But even that's a problem; can't even get numb an' dumb in an empty box without some smart-arsed cunt has t' complain [...]" (78).

A cursory reading of the play would diagnose Matt as a mutant, an aberration, but the fact of the matter is that Matt is perfectly attuned to his world. Matt's music is the voice of that world, his practice, the practice of that world – the abuse of music as "audioanalgesic," "a pain-killer – a distraction to dispel distraction" (Shafer 96). (One is inevitably reminded of *Saved*'s aspirin-pacified baby.) Furthermore, the stories Dan and Becky tell actually harmonize with Matt's tirades. Becky's recollection of her run-in with a friend of Dan's suggests that the percussive, concussive world to which Matt belongs is all there is:

He gid me a lift once; did the ton down the Newton Road. I was screamin', but he wouldn't stop; kept hittin' him on the back. [...] When he stopped, I smacked him in the face an' threw his crash helmet on a passin' lorry. [...] He chased after it flashin' his lights an' beepin' his horn. Eventually, the bloke stopped, got the wrong end of the stick an' did a bit of road-rage on him. (63)

Embedded in Becky's narrative is the roar of a motorcycle, the slap of a

hand on flesh, the blaring of a horn, and finally, the thud of “the stick” as it slams into a body.

Ironically, it is the silence of the silent majority that destroys any hope of a peaceable existence. “If on’y one of the neighbours’d cum forward as witnesses,” agonizes Dan as the couple pack what’s left of their pitiful belongings (82). Even if the neighbors hadn’t seen anything, “they must’ve ’eard summat” (82). “They’m scared,” is Becky’s stolid rejoinder, “It’s life; nuthin’ y’ can do about it” (82–83). Moreover, “Peace an’ quiet’s expensive” (82). As is the case in *Saved*, pure sound gets the last word. After the couple vacate the flat, Becky to move in with her parents, Dan to bunk in with a friend, the room becomes once again an empty space permeated by noise: “*As the front door closes, the music next door clicks into gear and floods the empty room with its thumping repetitive rhythm*” (84).

The indictment of noise as an index of poverty and violence can be found likewise in the work of Stephen Poliakoff. Like that of Jones, Poliakoff’s dramaturgy takes into account the electronic amplification of sound. As Matthew Martin observes, “[E]lectronic and mass media (including practically all forms of electronic communication from radios and telephones to video cameras, VCRs and public address systems), music (in a variety of forms, including muzak, characters’ singing, and a huge outdoor rock concert) [...] are the environmental terms in which all of Poliakoff’s [characters] define themselves” (199). Muzak in particular often becomes a kind of aural wallpaper in Poliakoff’s urban canyon plays. Martin argues that Muzak “serves as a reminder that this [the urban canyon] is an unnatural and inescapable landscape” (200). Thus, for Poliakoff, noise is not just an invasive force; noise is a given, a non-negotiable, palpable presence. It therefore makes no difference where one goes in a Poliakoff urban canyon. As one of his characters puts it, “Simply everywhere we go there’s noise” (*Hitting Town* 22). Another difference between Poliakoff’s soundscapes and those of *Saved* and *Noise* is that their occupants attempt to articulate the ecological connection between noise and overall quality of life. They don’t need to spend a fortnight in Dan and Becky’s apartment; they are already at least spasmodically aware.

Ralph, of *Hitting Town*, is obsessive about noise, calling attention to its presence and impact with a manic persistence tantamount to that of the narrator of Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart.” His first extended speech recalls Len’s eavesdropping activities: he complains about the noises produced by a couple making love in a train lav, private noises that intrude into public space. Just like Len also, he tenses, hearing noises that sometimes only he can hear. Ralph hears insects behind the wall, burglar alarms, car bombs about to explode, “the rumble of the city” (50). In the context of the soundscape of the play, however, Ralph’s fixation comes to sound more and more intelligible. Played against the overall tonal background of the play, his hysterical arias are of a piece with it. Folkerth observes of Shakespeare’s *Richard III* that *his sen-*



sitivity to sound enables him to “harness the acoustic disturbances created by others [...] to] produce and manage the sound waves that control and define the space around him” (29). Ralph, on the other hand, seems more like Othello, utterly unable to control the “acoustic field” (Folkerth 110). His personal radar, his hypersensitivity to noise, a sensitivity that seems unavailable to the characters of *Saved*, leaves him helplessly adrift in “a sea of sound” (Folkerth 108). If the geopathology of *Saved* is a desensitization, a kind of willful deafness, the form of it here is more akin to vertigo, the loss of balance associated with disorders of the middle ear.

Christine, of *Shout across the River*, unlike Ralph, wages a relentless battle against noisy things and people. She commands telephones to stop ringing and then snips their wires when they prove recalcitrant. When her mother sobs, she threatens to seal the woman’s lips with epoxy. Christine’s harangue about life in the ghettos of South London becomes that shout across the river, the shout that crosses the Thames to West End London, where well-heeled, well-fed theatre-goers crowd matinee performances of plays as unlike *Shout across the River* as possible. “I hate all this place,” she screams, “I hate all this muck they give us!” (54). Her fury boils over, surges across the proscenium barrier, as if *that* were the river across which one must shout to be heard. The proscenium, like the Thames, becomes a demarcation between working class and leisure class – those on one side trapped, noisy, and angry; those on the other, free, calm, and politely silent.

Poliakoff has sometimes been faulted for a certain lack of rhetorical rigor in his presentations of urban decay and pollution. For example, D. Keith Peacock makes the point that Poliakoff offers “no analysis” of the “economic or political causes” of urban blight (496). Una Chaudhuri draws a similar conclusion in the context of her discussion of another Poliakoff play, *Coming in to Land*. She argues that Poliakoff’s “sociocritique” is “barely articulated” and “muted” (181). I think that her choice of the word *muted* is telling. It suggests that we might need to listen bi-aurally. In other words, in Poliakoff’s dramaturgy, rigorous sociopolitical analysis rendered as linguistic text is likely to be played *pianissimo*. The fracas of poverty and deprivation, rendered *forte*, tends to drown out the other sub-channel. Poliakoff, because he is playing to our ears so intensely, tends to convey an impression of political naïveté or nostalgia. Matthew Martin argues that “serious speculation into their environment or social relationships seems beyond” Poliakoff’s urban canyon characters (203). Serious speculation is beyond anyone forced to endure an environment so aurally oppressive. “When this noise stops,” Clare announces in the last line of *Hitting Town*, “[...] I’m going to work” (51), but as the light fades and the music is still going strong, the “work” of critique and political theorizing remains undone.

Possibly the noisiest play I consider is Jim Cartwright’s *Road*. Unlike *Saved*, *Noise*, *Shout across the River*, or *Hitting Town*, *Road* openly acknowl-

edges the presence of the audience and purports to regard the audience members as so many houseguests. Scullery, the audience's guide to this Brit-side Hell's Kitchen, addresses them with studied politeness: "THIS IS OUR ROAD! But tonight it's your road an' all! Don't feel awkward wi' us, make yourselves at home" (5). However, beneath this cheery greeting lies the insinuation that he knows his "guests" for what they are – dabblers and day-trippers, tourists who have dropped in for a night of fashionable slumming. As Una Chaudhuri argues, *Road* is presented as "the photographic negative of the world from which the spectators come" (47). To borrow audio-electronic taxonomy, *Road* plays the tape hiss and the feedback squeals that middle-class audiences pay not to hear. Nonetheless, as Chaudhuri argues, despite the trappings of environmental theatre and its apparent hyper-inclusion of the audience, *Road* keeps its spectators "safely distanced" (47). Regardless of appearances to the contrary, Cartwright, like Poliakoff, Jones, and Bond, maintains the boundary between the world of the play and that of the audience, with the notable exception, as we have noted, of aural leakage between stage and stall.

In Cartwright's play, however, this aural leakage is two-way. To be sure, there are what the stage directions call the "*sounds of Road*" (17). Doors and windows are slammed open and shut. A kicked dustbin lid clatters, spins, and falls. Toilets flush noisily and dogs bark while an offstage voice sobs on and on. The pub's disco pumps out James Brown, Madonna, and Jerry Lee Lewis. As the Royal Court production made clear, control of the sound system is absolutely coterminous with control over physical space: as Eddie's father ratchets up the television "*full, rocketing blast*" (8), Eddie responds by turning up the volume on his cassette player. According to the production notes, the scene is meant to play as "an unspoken battle" (84), an acoustic turf war. Before long, this duet evolves into a quartet as an unseen neighbor obligingly provides percussion by pounding on the wall (whereupon Eddie pounds back). Chamber music indeed.

Television is assigned much the same role that it had played in *Noise* – mere producer of white noise. Young Clare makes this point explicit. "Any clever talk on the telly" is to be disregarded, since "that way madness lies" (36). Clare is clearly articulating the "just get on with it" singsong unimaginativeness that is the through-line for *Noise*'s Becky. In *Road*, television seems to serve much the same function as Techno music serves in *Noise* – like cheap beer, a means by which to get "numb and dumb" (Jones 78). This characterization of television is sharply at odds with a more politically aware appraisal of television. Stephen Watt explains: "[T]elevision's potential to isolate its consumers – particularly its minority or oppressed consumers – inevitably impairs their ability to resist the sources of their domination. [...] television is antithetical to freedom and community – to the struggles for self-knowledge and social justice" (160). However, television, despite its ubiquity, is paid so

little heed in *Road* that “its potential to isolate” is neutralized. The inhabitants of *Road* are not isolated. In fact, most of them socialize frantically – carousing, pub-crawling, coupling, and brawling at the top their lungs. In *Road*, lack of community and lack of the “self-knowledge” of which Watt writes cannot be attributed to the presence of television. The culprit is noise and a community that is “annoying itself” (Reed 22); television is culpable only insofar as it contributes to the pandemonium.

The quarrels of the shoddily housed pour out through paper-thin walls and mingle with the pandemonium of the streets below. Private noise continually penetrates public space, and community noise invades private space. This colonization of both kinds of space is so thoroughgoing that, to all intents and purposes, there is no clear demarcation between private space and public space. Simply everywhere one goes, there’s noise. The denizens of *Road* must shout to be heard, and shout they do. They pound on walls and doors; they kick, they scream. Those on the other side of the wall pound back. The bedlam is punctuated by the running refrain of the plea for silence – “Shut it!” (52) – inevitably rendered more vociferously than the original offending racket. The “request” that somebody “turn that bleeding music down or off or summat” is screamed at full decibel (59). A mother, as if to echo Ralph’s irritation about the couple in the train lav, complains to her daughter that she is sick of the noise of lovemaking produced by her daughter and boyfriend in the room above hers.

Such is the “A”-soundtrack of *Road*, a lo-fidelity soundtrack identical to those composed by Poliakoff, Jones, and Bond. The “B”-soundtrack, a kind of contrapuntal music, emanates from outside of *Road*, from a faraway world to which the inhabitants of *Road* have no real access. This soundtrack is very tinny and relatively faint. The sound cue that launches the play proper – a recording of Judy Garland’s “Somewhere over the Rainbow” – is the first manifestation of this B-soundtrack. The tinkling strains of “When You Wish upon a Star,” produced by Scullery’s trash-picked music box, is another. The sounds of American schmaltz – Barry Manilow, Andy Williams – likewise belong to track B. Also affiliated with track B is Clare’s sad little rendition of “Wonderful World”: “Don’t know much about history. Don’t know much about society. But I do know that I love you and I know that if you’d love me too what a wonderful world this would be” (40). Track B is a paean to uncomplicated feeling as a solution to all of life’s ills, instrumental chicken soup. Periodically, this soundtrack is foregrounded, only to be drowned out by the collective sonic boom of the A-soundtrack. The salient feature of this B-soundtrack is its reassuring sentimentality.

Sometimes, however, as in the monologue delivered by “middle-aged, soft-spoken, threadbare” Jerry (26), this soundtrack is associated with a past of hard times but communal purpose – the Big Band era: “[...] that big silver ball turning there and all the lights coming off it onto us lot dancing below, and the

big band there. [...] There was so many jobs then. [...] We all felt special but safe at the same time. [...] I can't see how that time could turn into this time" (26–27). If track A is the woofer, track B is definitely the tweeter. Track A is the music of the lower depths; track B, *Road* seems to suggest, is the music of another time, an elsewhere – not necessarily a finer world, but a world that felt “safe.” Track B sings the praises of what Chaudhuri would call an “unreflective,” “unproblematized” “bourgeois discourse of home” (8). While “Somewhere over the Rainbow” may celebrate the exotic lure of Oz, the Depression-era film *The Wizard of Oz* ringingly insists that “there’s no place like home” and that all of one’s desires can be satisfied within the confines of one’s own backyard.<sup>3</sup> Track B is not necessarily or consistently the butt of satire; it is simply irrelevant to the anti-home space of *Road*. Track B is the music of fantasy and/or nostalgia; for the most part, it simply cannot stand up to the jarring rhythms and coarse, earthy libretto of track A. Track B is also by extension, given the logic of the play, the music of the audience, the privileged ones who can afford to believe that “when you wish upon a star, makes no difference who you are.” They are also the ones who have access to an elsewhere; they can go home to their nice, quiet houses once the show is over. The inhabitants of *Road* can hear the music of the audience, but they cannot pinpoint or analyze the source of that sound. It simply emanates from somewhere over the rainbow.

The play’s penultimate scene is the one instance when both soundtracks not only come together, but actually harmonize. The scene transpires in Brink’s living room, a room dominated by “a massive stereo speaker, like bands have” (65). Two couples arrive, the girls having been picked up in a bar by Brink and Eddie. Drinks are passed around, and it looks as if this scene will degenerate into yet another orgy of groping, sex, passing out, and throwing up. But something unexpected happens. Carol decides she’s had enough. She wants “somethin’ else to happen for a change” (74). “Surprisingly,” as Chaudhuri points out, “the men take up the challenge” (51). “Do you like good music?” Eddie asks Carol and Louise (75), and the offstage audience braces itself, fully anticipating a barrage of punk rock or at least more of track A. Instead, the sound that emerges from those massive speakers is a gentle, Depression-era ballad, performed in a soft, Southern soul version by Otis Redding. The stage directions indicate that “Try a Little Tenderness” not only plays out to the end, but that the foursome listens to it in complete silence. The song is aptly chosen, for it can be read as a song about retaining the ability to be compassionate, even in the face of deprivation and grinding poverty.<sup>4</sup> After listening, each renders his or her own lament about life in the warren that is *Road*. Louise concludes with her own shout across the river: “If I keep shouting somehow a somehow I might escape” (79). The others take up the line and turn it into a choral chant that grows louder and faster with each iteration. The collective act of listening with attention to track B has culminated in the per-

formance of an antiphonic version of track A. As the chant reaches its crescendo, the scene culminates in a blackout and silence.

The offstage ear-witnesses have to wonder whether they have just heard the curative primal scream, a barbaric yawp, or merely the howls of the damned. *Road* ends quietly enough – the muffled thud of a dropped shoe, “*The sound of dreamy humming*,” “*The sound of a bottle rolling*” (81). Scullery does not ask for applause; he merely, with light mockery, dismisses his “guests”: “If you’re ever in the area call again” (81). *Road* stops, apparently, merely because everyone is too tired to talk, let alone scream. Tomorrow, at the next performance, all of the noises of *Road* will start up again. (Every time Hamlet dies, “the world fills up again with sound.”) Chaudhuri argues that the spectator of *Road* “is subject to a discourse of difference [...] which has the effect of putting his or her ‘seeing’ of the play deeply in question” (52). To this, one could add that a hearing of the play is no less problematic.

What do audiences “hear” when they listen to *Road*, or, for that matter, *Saved* or *Noise* or *Shout across the River*? Herbert Blau points out that any audience attending any given production, regardless of how collectively engaged it may appear to be, is in reality “an immeasurable aggregate of divisive audition [...] a network of noise, static, feedback, overtones, and phasings out; synapses, blank spaces” (99). Then, of course, there is disengagement: “What the theater always struggles with is amnesia and inattention” (119). The conclusion, however, that “[m]issing the point is [...] mostly what an audience does” might be a bit overhasty (126). Instead, the tentative claim that William Demastes makes for the work of Poliakoff might apply equally well to any of the contemporary plays discussed here: “Perhaps Poliakoff is in fact advocating a change of spirit rather than legislative, political, and/or social change [...] [His] theatre may in fact provide the actual direction for substantial change: a fresher look at what the theatre can do (advise the critics) and what society must do (advise fellow citizens)” (33). For anything to happen at all, however, audiences would be well-advised to “listen up and listen good.”

#### NOTES

- 1 In teaching this play to undergraduates, I have often found it useful to press into service the static noise produced by an untuned television. As I wheel in the VCR cart, the students are delighted, thinking that they are about to watch a film. Instead, I turn on the TV, set it to produce static, then turn up the volume as loud as I dare. Finally, I choose a few students to shout the lines from one of the play’s many argument scenes over the static. In short order, the actors are red-faced and breathless, and the listening audience is visibly irritated by the din. (If I turn up the volume too high, I can expect to be interrupted by a justifiably annoyed colleague.)
- 2 Techno is a genre of very fast disco music, emphasizing electronic sound effect and

strongly influenced by technology—in fact, it uses electronic instrumentation only. It is characterized by a 4/4 beat and eight-bar repeating structure featuring predominantly percussive tracks. Techno features repetitive looping and eschews melody. Techno, which originated in Detroit, can be associated explicitly with “the monotonous, robotic aspect of living in Motor City.” Its “hard and minimal nature” is an “artistic response to dilapidated [*sic*], industrial environments” (“Techno”). See also Fritz.

- 3 “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” is presented in another version as well. Mrs. Bald’s screeched version actually belongs to Track A and offers an ironic commentary on the July Garland recording. Another Depression-era musical allusion turns up in Eddie’s speech immediately following the Otis Redding song: “I got me suit I got me image, suit, image, (*He sings*) “Who could ask for anything more?” The line is from George Gershwin’s “I Got Rhythm” (*Girl Crazy*, 1930).
- 4 “Try a Little Tenderness” was written by Harry M. Woods, James Campbell, and Reginald Connelly. It was first recorded by Ruth Etting on 8 February 1933. The Otis Redding version improvises a bit on the lyrics, but retains the essential wording and feel of the original. The original first verse reads as follows:

She may be weary,  
Women do get weary  
Wearing the same shabby dress  
And when she’s weary,  
Try a little tenderness.

The song’s refrain, as if sensing the male listener’s rejection, claims that tenderness is “not just sentimental.” The song seems a made-to-order response to Clare’s catalog of feminine deprivation: “I can’t stand wearing the same clothes again and again. Re-hemming, re-stitching [...] I can’t buy my favourite shampoo. Everybody’s poor and sickly-white” (32). A more cynical reading of the song would argue that tenderness is merely a male sexual ploy and/or that tenderness is a woefully inadequate response to the living conditions created either by the Great Depression or the unemployment culture of post-capitalist life in cities such as Manchester or Birmingham.

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