

SOUNDS, VIOLENCE, AND POWER STRUCTURES IN *AMONG THE LOST* BY EMILIANO MONGE.¹

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the auditive dimension in Emiliano Monge's *Among the Lost* (2018). I argue that the sounds are connected to different forms of violence, and that their use in the novel destabilizes the rigidity of power relations between victims and perpetrators. The representation of sounds and silence concretizes the violence towards the victims, and reveals the transient nature of categories and positions within the structure of violence and power. The difference in power is symbolized by the difference in speech volume and access to environmental sounds between criminals and migrants, an allusion to the systemic violence of Monge's border zone. Volume and intensity also refer to concrete subjective violence towards the kidnapped migrants, who are both physically and mentally tortured. The sounds and their connotations illustrate that the violent superstructure is independent of the individuals committing crimes, because they turn out to be disposable pawns, parts of a criminal system that transcends the individual.

INTRODUCTION

Migration between Mexico and the United States has a long history, and up until this day, it has the highest level of (illegal) border traffic in the world. For decades, the majority of migrants crossing the U.S.-Mexican border were Mexicans. However, this last decade, due to poverty and gang violence, more and more migrants have been coming from Central America, and especially from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, the Northern Triangle. In order to reach the United States, they undertake the dangerous journey across Mexico, where they run the risk to be kidnapped, tortured and murdered. This shift has been reflected in border writing, because recently, more and more authors have written about these migrant caravans, in literary texts such as *La fila india* (2013) by Antonio Ortuño, *Amarás a Dios sobre todas las cosas* (2013) by Alejandro Hernández and *Yo tuve un sueño* (2019) by Juan Pablo Villalobos. One of them is Emiliano Monge (1978), a Mexican author and political scientist, whose works represent

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violence in its multiple facets (Hernández Ruiz), a theme that has also elicited numerous reflections on his third novel, *Las tierras arrasadas* (2015).² Translated by Frank Wynne as *Among the Lost* (2018), it narrates a story of victims, Central American migrants, and perpetrators, their Mexican traffickers. The journey of the migrants intertwines with the tragic love story between Epitafio and Estela, members of a criminal gang of human traffickers, led by Father Nicho. The priest is also the head of the orphanage where the lovers grew up, El Paraíso – a rather morbid choice of name, because it turns out to be an infernal place, where young orphans are molded into criminals and murderers. Epitafio and Estela have to transport the migrants to places where they will work as slaves, if they are not murdered along the way. They are travelling in separate groups, and as they constantly miss each other's phone calls, they are unable to communicate. The lovers are so submerged in their personal issues and these attempts of reaching the other, that they fail to see the signs of their colleagues' betrayal, who carry out the plan that Father Nicho has arranged to annihilate both of them.

An important element is that Estela is deaf, and that she depends on her implants to hear Epitafio's phone calls, as well as the sounds of her surroundings. *Among the Lost* was originally written as a play, which could explain the predominance of sounds and even more the use of the chorus, a remnant of ancient Greek tragedy. The abundance of references to the sounds of the jungle, the noises made by animals, and the conversations between the characters, allows the reader to imagine the atmosphere in which the events of the novel take place. Therefore, I propose to reflect on the sensorial, and more specifically, the sonic references in *Among the Lost* by Emiliano Monge. I argue that the sounds are connected to different forms of violence, and that a thorough examination of the use of the sounds reveals the rigidity of power relations between victims and perpetrators. On the one hand, they concretize the violence towards the

² More specifically, violence in terms of “the process of de-subjectivity over residual bodies” (Peña Iguarán 135) and the “poetics of death” (Calderón Le Joliff & Zárate 18), amongst others. However, the connection between sound and violence has not been studied before.

victims, and on the other, sounds – or more specifically, the lack thereof – reveal the transient nature of categories and positions within the structure of violence and power.

After commenting on some of the theoretical concepts of sensory, sound, and violence studies, departing from Žižek's categorization of violence, the different sounds – human, natural and mechanical – will be examined in relation to the victims and perpetrators. The two groups appear strictly separated, confirmed in their way of speaking and their access to natural and mechanical sounds, but Estela's deafness and further deterioration reveal how these relations of violence and sound can be subverted. This way, sounds and their connotations illustrate that the violent superstructure is independent of the different individuals committing crimes, because they turn out to be disposable pawns, parts of a criminal system that transcends the individual.

SENSORY/SOUND STUDIES AND VIOLENCE

As it is known, since Aristotle, there have been (at least) five senses. Most (Western) scholars agree on the primacy of the visual, followed by hearing, smell, taste and touch. Sight and hearing are considered superior because of the distance between the subject and the perceived object. The three other senses are often categorized as minor, even animal, senses. Taste and touch involve contact with the body and materiality, and smell is even more difficult to circumscribe. The Age of Enlightenment established “ocularcentrism”, the dominance of visual representation as the direct path to reason. Recently, although sight still occupies a central place, there is a growing scholarly interest in the senses “beyond sight” (Howes), not necessarily related to instinctual or lower levels of experience. Since the end of the previous millennium, we are witnessing a sensory turn in the humanities, but literary scholars continue to be underrepresented, although there is an incipient apparatus, specifically for non-contemporary literature.

One of the strands that goes “beyond sight” is that of sound studies, defined by Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld as an “interdisciplinary area that studies the material production and consumption of music, sound, noise, and silence, and how these have changed throughout history and within societies (636). Sound scientists introduced concepts such as the soundscape or “sonic environment” (Schafer 274), and acoustemology (Feld), which studies “sound as a modality of knowing and being in the world” (226). More specifically, an “acoustemology of violence” investigates those “types of musical and sonic knowledge (and therefore of redefinition of the practices of giving voice, sound, listen or silencing) that arise in contexts of violence” (Ochoa Gautier). It concerns the ways in which violence reorganizes the acoustic landscape and determines what can be said, and what, or even who, has to be silenced. Daughtry goes even further in stating that, in violent contexts “sound becomes indistinguishable from violence itself” (27). An analysis of the sonic dimension can thus lead to an understanding of structures of violence and oppression.

The different forms of violence in *Among the Lost* can be analyzed according to Žižek’s classification of “subjective” and “objective” violence. Subjective violence is the most explicit form, as it can be traced back to “a clearly identifiable agent” (Žižek 1). Objective violence can be divided in two categories: symbolic violence, “embodied in language and its forms” (2), and systemic violence, the “often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our political and economic systems” (2). Whereas subjective violence constitutes a clear disruption of “the ‘normal’, peaceful state of things” (2), objective violence is inherent to this normality, and thus not as easily detectible. In *Among the Lost* however, objective violence has become visible, and it has even been accepted as a device of control (del Sarto 81), as illegal enterprises engaged in drug and/or people trafficking have come to dominate the border zone. The exploitation of migrants as well as the buying and selling of their bodies as a lucrative business are characteristic of what Sayak Valencia calls *gore capitalism*, “the reinterpretation of the

hegemonic global economy in (geographic) border spaces” (19). She uses this concept to describe the specific functioning of border towns, where blood, corpses, mutilated bodies and captive lives are seen as instruments in the reproduction of capital (Estévez 229). The existence of criminal gangs is an inevitable consequence of failed states, of corruption in official institutions, and their incapacity to reassure the well-being of citizens. Hence, the traffickers can be considered as both products of systemic violence and active agents of subjective violence. The participants of the system of gore capitalism sacrifice their individuality in a possibility of rising in the social hierarchy. They become *endriago* subjects, who recur to “brutal kinds of violence as tools of *necroempowerment*” (Valencia 20). In *Among the Lost*, the de-subjection of the gang members, their transformation into *endriago* subjects, is symbolized by the exchange of their real name for a nickname. These pseudonyms, given to them by Father Nicho, denote their function within the criminal machine. Moreover, they have a connotation of death, in the visual dimension, as they refer to ornaments or rituals related to the burial of the deceased: Epitafio (epitaph), Estela (gravestone), Sepelio (burial), but also the names of other members, such as Cementeria (cemetery) and Hipogeo (hypogeum). These funerary connotations are illustrative of the hopelessness of the migrants’ situation, as they suggest that they will not survive this journey.

The criminals have complete control over the people and the land. As “undisguised and unjustified bloodshed” (Valencia 19) and extreme abuse, physical as well as psychological, of the most vulnerable, constitute a normality, the concept of necropolitics seems to apply, theorized by Achille Mbembe as “contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death” (39). In the borderlands, dominated by gore capitalism and necropolitics, the sovereignty of the traffickers consists of “the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” (11). As official institutions lack power in this territory, alternative norms of conduct have emerged and criminal subjects have taken over the superior position. Consequently, the

perpetrators are not legally persecuted for their actions. However, it turns out that the impunity of the offenders depends on their position within the criminal gang. As a whole, the traffickers are superior to the migrants, but the organization itself has another hierarchical distinction between leaders and subordinates. Father Nicho, as head of the gang, occupies the highest position, followed by Estela and Epitafio, who are in charge of their own parts of the gang. Their inferiors are, amongst others, Sepelio, an accomplice travelling alongside Epitafio, and the so called “sons of the jungle”, two brothers who are in charge of guiding the migrants through the jungle towards the traffickers. Epitafio and Estela might not be persecuted by official judiciary institutions, but they are punished by the priest, who personifies the law in the border zone.

All of the above – the lack of a strong official leading institution, the predominance of crime, violence as a controlling device – turn the borderlands into a “state of exception”, defined by Giorgio Agamben as “this no-man’s-land between public law and political fact, and between the juridical order and life” (*State of Exception* 1). The migrants are caught in the middle of their journey, no longer belonging to their homelands but at the same time unable to reach their destination. In the claws of the traffickers, unprotected by law or state, they are reduced to “products of exchange” (Valencia 20). Therefore, they can be compared to the *homo sacer*, the “obscure figure of archaic Roman law, in which human life is included in the juridical order [...] solely in the form of its exclusion” (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 8). As a modern *homo sacer*, the refugee is reduced to bare life, the annihilation of every aspect of human life, considered as *zoë* – biological life – without *bios* – political value. Even more so, for the *endriago* subjects, the lives of the migrants they transport have no value at all. Hence, the victims also undergo a process of de-subjection, deprived of their individual identities and forcibly reduced to an inferior status and victims to different forms of extreme violence. In what follows, I will focus on the sounds and their literal as well as symbolic meaning.

HUMAN SHOUTING AND WHISPERING

Regarding the human sounds, the contrast in power between victims and perpetrators is reflected in the conflict between the soft sounds of the migrants' careful whispers and the loud noise of the criminals hostile yelling.

First, the speech of the gang members can be characterized by its aggressive tone, both in content and in volume: "Move your fucking arses or we really will shoot you" (Monge 15). Speech volume is indicative of their position in the hierarchy because the higher in rank, the louder their voice. Regardless of the intensity, all the members of the gang use vulgar and hurtful language, and not only when speaking to the migrants. The use of exclamation marks adds a visual dimension to the intensity of the sounds produced by the traffickers, demonstrating their superior position in the borderlands and thus evoking systemic violence. At the same time, however, the shouted insults are a concrete example of subjective violence. In this context, the consequences of verbal aggressions appear to be more profound than the physical violence the migrants suffer. Although the kicks and punches cause pain and leave visible marks, the humiliation and fear that follow the shouted insults and threats have a more immediate effect: silence. Indirectly, the criminals control the speech volume of their victims.

Second, the speech of the victims can be divided into three modalities: whisperings, silence, and on rare occasions, non-verbal expressions such as yelling and moaning. Some of the migrants' whispered dialogues and commentaries are direct quotes from Dante's *Divine Comedy*, integrated in italics in the main text: "*Just as when the fog lifts and the eyes refashion the form of what was merely insinuated by the mists*, those who hail from other lands but not from other tongues recognise the song being sung above their heads, and so they realise they *must abandon all hope*" (Monge 53).³ In other fragments, real testimonies from Central

³ This is a reference to the famous line from Dante's *Inferno*: "lasciate ogni speranza".

American migrants are graphically represented at the right of the page, in a smaller font, sometimes in italics:

I see it clearly ... as clearly as I have ever seen anything ...
the shadows will eventually recede ... You will see many new
horizons... You will be with those who love you again... Those
who love you will come back ... Life will reward your pain
and your prayers. (171)

These interventions are reminiscent of Greek tragedy's chorus. According to Helen H. Bacon, "choral performance is an action, a response to a significant event, and in some way integral to that event" (18). Such is the case in *Among the Lost*, where the members of the chorus comment on the main events of the plot, namely the kidnapping and torturing of migrants. They are represented as a collective character, which can be seen as a reflection of the way the migrants are perceived by the traffickers and a metaphor of their invisibility in extraliterary reality. Occasionally however, individual voices arise. The same "alternation between 'I' and 'we' [...] is characteristic of choral song" (9). Fragments such as, "*I pleaded with God for help... begged Him not to allow this to happen to us... I prayed and they laughed*" (Monge 68) are followed by: "*They were constantly screaming at us, beating us, pissing on us... They did not let us speak to each other, look at each other*" (76). Even though they are part of a faceless mass, the individual members narrate their personal experiences, evoking their fears and pains. The interruptions of the chorus remind the reader of the reality behind the fictional atrocities. In Greek tragedy, the chorus constituted a "constant presence, *in some ways participants in every onstage event, even when they were silent*" (Bacon 8). This introduces the second modality, the silence surrounding the victims in the back of the trucks. They refrain from speaking because they are afraid of being caught and punished. Moreover, sometimes their silence is involuntary, imposed by their oppressors. Silence thus represents the violence of their situation, the atrocities that leave them without a voice: "the women who no longer have the strength to rip even a single word from their silence" (Monge 79). However, fear not

always generates silence, because at times, their panic is so intense that they recur to cries and moans to exteriorize their worries and emotions. In this third modality of auditory expression, the non-verbal refers to the ineffable character of fear: “*men and women whose fears can no longer be expressed in words but only in brief whimpers, deep cries and lamentations like howls of pain*” (200). There are no words for what is happening to them, the situation is unknown and terrifying: “*by now we were not ashamed to sob, we were howling dogs, animals*” (58). In this scene, their non-verbal expressions mirror the animalization suffered by the migrants. It can thus be said that the representation of human sounds reflects the inferior position of the migrants as *homo sacer*.

LOSS OF NATURAL AND MECHANICAL SOUNDS

The migrants are reduced to a group of savages, trapped and locked up in chains: “the timeless creatures in the back of the truck, their hands bound, their feet shackled to strange weights” (Monge 157). This image of the migrants tied by their feet recalls the slave trade, and specifically the Middle Passage, the transport of slaves from Africa to the New World. It also evokes the idea of the *homo sacer*. The migrants are robbed of their possessions, their dignity and even their status of human beings. They are reduced to bare life, which entails a process of de-subjection, reinforced by their lack of names. Remarkably, before being trapped, they were described as “these creatures who still have a God, a name, a soul and a shadow” (302). But once they are caught, they are referred to as the “nameless”, “godless”, or even “soulless”. This illustrates and underlines how the migrants are seen as mere products, to be exploited for the benefit of the traffickers. They lose every feature that might make them human, or that could hint to a former identity, political, social or individual.

Furthermore, the victims’ decline to bare life is also symbolized by their access to the environmental sounds. Before their capture, as they were walking through the jungle, they were

surrounded by its soundtrack: “the screech of bats and the singing of cicadas, and from time to time there comes the howl of coyotes, the bark of dogs no one has ever tamed, from time to time peacocks shriek” (149). From the moment in which they are caught, the natural sounds – connected to freedom, the soundtrack of their journey towards a better life – are replaced by human ones, referring to the subjective violence of their aggressors and the impossibility of ever reaching their destiny. Locked up and isolated from the outside world, these sounds caused by humans are their only point of reference. The auditive dimension emphasizes the desperation of their situation because the absence of natural sounds creates “an atmosphere that stresses the feeling of isolation only disturbed by the noise of men (banging, shouting, shooting), reminding them from time to time of their presence” (Le Joliff & Zárate 22). Consequently, the migrants end up fearing every single sound, because it implies that the perpetrators are approaching:

Every time we relaxed the noise would start up again... and we knew by now that noise was not good... the silence lasted thirty minutes at most... maybe forty... never an hour... I thought it would be better if we could not hear... if we were deaf”. (Monge 50)

In contrast to the victims’ limited soundscape, the criminals perceive the noises coming from animals and nature, and also the mechanical noises produced by their vehicles, their cellphones and their weapons. Especially the noises coming from the cars are present, as the transportation of 74 bodies would be impossible without them. This explains why they treat them with so much respect. When one of the cars seems broken, “Epitafio gets to his feet and extinguishes the lamp, and listens doubtfully to the clanking gears as a doctor might listen to a patient’s chest” (5). The inanimate object is treated as a human being, which underlines by contrast the inhumane treatment of the migrants. The different instruments, as well as their flashlights – which confirm their visual power, as these objects allow them to see and act even during the night’s darkest hours – are out of reach for the migrants, who were deprived of all

of their possessions and thus lack certain instruments which would help them survive. It can thus be said that the mechanical noises, in their connection to the traffickers, indicate a relation of inequality, emphasizing the precariousness of the migrants' situation. Hence, not only speech volume and power are related, but the access to natural and mechanical soundscape also indicates positions within the border hierarchy.

ESTELA'S DEAFNESS: LOSS OF PROTECTION AND POWER

Until now, the traffickers have been categorized as perpetrators and the migrants as victims. However, throughout the novel, it becomes clear that these categories are dynamic, and that the different positions within the criminal structure can be occupied by anyone. When Estela and Epitafio lose Father Nicho's trust, they are degraded and even banned from the criminal hierarchy. This entails a promotion for Sepelio, who substitutes Epitafio as the right hand of the priest. The couple's loss of power is partly caused by their egoism, which is alluded to by some of the nicknames they receive by the narrator: *IhearonlywhatIwant* [Estela], *Theblindwomanofthedesert* and *Hewhoisdeafofmind*.⁴ Epitafio and Estela are entirely submerged in their private affairs, their romantic worries and personal doubts. This self-absorption can be interpreted as a form of metaphorical deafness, and even blindness, because they pay no attention to their surroundings, and consequently they cannot hear nor see the signs announcing their failure. This is frequently and explicitly addressed by the narrator: "*IhearonlywhatIwant* is so self-absorbed she does not even hear the sounds leaching from beneath the doors she passes" (85). But the impossibility of hearing has a literal dimension as well, because Estela is deaf. However, it is only at the end of the novel that she completely

⁴ In each part, the two protagonists receive another nickname: *IhearonlywhatIwant* and *Thunderhead*, *ShewhoadoresEpitafio* and *HewhosolovesEstela*, and *Theblindwomanofthedesert* and *Hewhoisdeafofmind*. This constant change in name reflects the instability of their position in terms of power and control.

loses the ability to hear, when she loses her prostheses that allow her to hear the surrounding sounds. Therefore, there is a difference between Estela's partial and complete deafness.

The implants are elements of power and weakness at the same time, of independence and dependence. They are tools of domination, because Estela can adjust the volume of any sound. The quality and intensity of her soundscape improves and she is "able to hear *the timid words, the muffled howls, the accents of fear, the sighs and the pleas* of the men and women who fled their lands" (15-16). Furthermore, in contrast to the other characters, she can voluntarily disconnect from her (sonic) surroundings. Her disability thus constitutes an advantage, because when the noises become unbearable, she can lower the volume of her hearing aids, or even take them out: "All this fucking noise! ShewhoadoresEpitafio complains bitterly, and angrily brings her hands to her ears and rips out the two tiny implants" (222). Hence, the nickname "IhearonlywhatIwant" seems appropriate, because she autonomously decides what she hears. Nonetheless, her control and power are temporary and unstable, because, when she runs away from two police officers payed by Father Nicho to kill her, her implants fall, and she is defenseless. This loss of power is illustrated by the complete absence of sounds: "She has lost several things: she no longer has her gun, her flashlight or her telephone, nor, more importantly, the prostheses she needs in order to hear" (289). Like her victims, she loses all of her possessions. And similarly, her decline to bare life entails an isolation from her sonic and visual surroundings. When she discovers that Epitafio has thrown himself in front of a car and died, she "puts out her eyes: why would she need them when she will never again see Epitafio, when her world is a perfect circular void, pure distance, pure nothingness?" (337). The nickname "Theblindwomanofthedesert" no longer has a metaphoric meaning, but is a literal description of her situation.⁵ Estela now finds herself in a similar situation as her former victims, who can neither hear natural or mechanical sounds nor see

⁵ The tragic element of this scene, although impossible to ignore, cannot be further developed here.

because of the darkness of the truck. Despite their different position within the hierarchy of the borderlands, the *endriago* and the *homo sacer* meet the same destiny.

CONCLUSION

In *Among the Lost*, sounds do not serve as mere descriptive decorations, but they have a conceptual dimension. The narrative's use of sounds concretizes different forms of violence, from the explicit to the more concealed ones: "*Sound renders violence public and diffuse*" (Daughtry 46). In this analysis, sounds and noises are not seen "as *the cause* of violent action, but rather as *symbolic resources* that actors can mobilise in processes or dynamics of violence" (Velasco-Pufleau 4). The loud voices and shouted insults from the perpetrators are concrete manifestations of the subjective violence towards the migrants, whose muffled voices are a consequence of their panic, but also an allusion to their invisibility in the extraliterary reality. Furthermore, the migrants are deprived of access to environmental sounds, which heightens their sense of loss, and their reduction to bare life. However, when Estela becomes deaf and blind, the relation, and more specifically, the difference, between perpetrator and victim is destabilized. Both *endriago* and *homo sacer* pass through a process of de-subjection, their situation is unpredictable, salvation improbable and death impossible to escape. Nonetheless, regardless of the individuals' perils, the superstructure remains. The death and disappearance of the principal accomplices of the gang does not have a negative impact on the functioning of the criminal system as their positions are immediately occupied by other individuals.

Although this article focused on the sonic implications of violence, an analysis of the other senses should prove fruitful, because the hostile nature of the border zone "besieges the sensorium" (Daughtry 25). For example, the corpses of assassinated migrants are burned, so all that remains of them is the smell of their burnt bodies. This reveals how the violence in the borderlands generates corporal and mental reactions that affect the entire perceptual apparatus.

The all-encompassing effect of violence is also reflected in the title, *Among the Lost*, which can be interpreted as a reference to the systemic violence of the borderlands, where all hope has to be abandoned (to say it in Dante's words) and where violence has become a way of living and a tool of control.⁶ In Monge's border zone, not only hope, but every individual is lost. The love story between Epitafio and Estela is not a trivial detail because it humanizes these seemingly heartless figures. The stark contrast between the tenderness of their feelings towards each other on the one hand, and their hostile behavior towards the migrants on the other, emphasizes the barbarities that human beings are willing to commit when they are part of a larger system and protected as a part of this whole. Monge once argued that literature should be seen as a "vehicle to make visible certain ideas that were not visible before" (in Washington). In *Among the Lost*, what is made visible and audible, are those structures of power and violence that transcend the individual. Moreover, Monge gives a voice to subjects that are often ignored, forgotten, or unheard. With this novel, his readers are forced not to close their eyes or cover their ears for the atrocities of humankind.

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⁶ The same goes for the original title, *Las tierras arrasadas*, which could refer to the military strategy *tierra quemada* or scorched earth, where territories and possessions of the opponent are destroyed, in order to debilitate them. The gang members of Emiliano Monge's novel seem to apply the same strategy and as a consequence of their brutal actions, the territories through which they pass, turn into devastated, desolate, scorched lands.

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