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Feminine Soundscapes Paesaggi Sonori Al Femminile

Edited by Pamela Parenti, Ellen Patat, Daniela Bombara



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Daniela Bombara & Ellen Patat



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Daniela Bombara & Ellen Patat – Editors’note	I
Alessandra Calanchi – Prefazione “Un atto d’amore”	7
Pamela Parenti – Introduzione	10

Articles / Articoli

Héloïse Faucherre-Buresi – A Feminine Narration of the Phonosphere? Women Travellers and Sound in Nineteenth-Century Italy	15
Annunziata Zevola– “Era sempre quella voce.” Forme sonore della soggettività nella <i>Marion</i> di Annie Vivanti	27
Loredana Palma – La folla, la festa, i rituali sociali: antropofonie nella narrativa di Matilde Serao	42
Pamela Parenti– Paesaggi sonori e processi cognitivi nel racconto <i>Viaggio meraviglioso di Gianni nel paese delle parole</i> di Laura Orvieto	57
Simone Pettine – Melodie della solitudine. Indagini sulla sonorità nascosta dei racconti di Anna Banti	72
Francesca Favaro – ‘Per sempre sirena’: musiche al femminile nella Napoli di Anna Maria Ortese	87
Lucas Asmaron – Il paesaggio come eco dell’anima: le donne “specchio” della ricerca esistenziale in Gozzano e Guccini	98

Interviste / Interviews

Daniela Bombara – Intervista a Silvia Colasanti (compositrice) / <i>Interview with Silvia Colasanti (composer)</i>	114
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A Feminine Narration of the Phonosphere? Woman Travellers and Sound in Nineteenth-Century Italy

Héloïse Faucherre-Buresi*

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ABSTRACT

[IT] Questo articolo analizza il modo in cui le viaggiatrici europee dell'Ottocento in Italia hanno percepito e narrato il suono, interrogando l'esistenza di un rapporto specifico tra i loro scritti e quello che i recenti contributi dei *sound studies* hanno chiamato la fonosfera. Al crocevia tra la riflessione sul viaggio al femminile e il rinnovamento metodologico dei *sound studies*, il contributo propone di andare oltre la nozione di *soundscape* per ripensare il suono come spazio uditivo socialmente costruito, incarnato e conflittuale. Basandosi su un corpus di diari di viaggio pubblicati in francese e in inglese tra l'inizio del secolo e l'unificazione nazionale, l'articolo esamina la relativa scarsità, la selettività e la funzione narrativa dei riferimenti sonori. L'analisi individua ricorrenze significative, tenendo conto al contempo delle variazioni geografiche tra Italia settentrionale e Italia meridionale. Piuttosto che postulare un 'ascolto femminile' essenzializzato, l'articolo mostra come l'attenzione sonora delle viaggiatrici sia modellata da convenzioni letterarie, immaginari geopolitici e contingenze storiche.

Parole chiave: fonosfera, viaggiatrici europee, Italia, Ottocento

[EN] This article investigates how nineteenth-century European women travellers in Italy perceived and narrated sound, and whether their writings articulate a distinctive engagement with what recent sound studies term the phonosphere. Situating itself at the intersection of gendered travel writing and the methodological renewal of sound studies, the article moves beyond the visual notion of 'soundscape' to foreground sound as a socially constructed, embodied and contested auditory space. Drawing on a corpus of published travel diaries in French and English between the early nineteenth century and Italian unification, it examines the relative scarcity, selectivity and narrative functions of sonic references. The analysis highlights recurring patterns while accounting for geographical and political variation between northern and southern Italy. Rather than positing an essentialised 'female listening', the article argues that women's sonic attention is shaped by literary conventions, geopolitical imaginaries and historical circumstances.

Keywords: phonosphere, European women travellers, Italy, Ottocento

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A Feminine Narration of the Phonosphere? Woman Travellers and Sound in Nineteenth-Century Italy

Introduction

In 1864, after travelling across southern Italy, the Belgian geologist Henri-Sébastien Le Hon paused before a Campanian woman. In his account, admiration for the “beautiful, biblical-looking” woman abruptly gives way to acoustic repulsion: “Mais que cette belle campanienne, à l’aspect biblique, ne s’avise pas de parler, car aussitôt adieu le charme. Une voix crierde et violente vous blesse l’oreille, en même temps que de grands gestes rompent tout ce noble équilibre” (Le Hon 1864: 170).¹ The disjunction between the woman’s appearance and the sonic impression of her voice is presented as almost violent, capable of shattering the aesthetic harmony of the scene. Le Hon’s brief remark is emblematic of a broader phenomenon: the perception and narration of sound in travel literature is deeply entangled with the gender of the perceiving subject (Battesti & Puig 2016). His description prompts a series of questions: would a woman traveller have described this same voice as ‘strident’ or ‘violent’? Would she have experienced the same rupture between visual expectation and sonic reality? Would she have narrated sound using the same vocabulary, metaphors, and affective registers?

This article explores how nineteenth century European women travellers in Italy perceived, interpreted, and narrated sound, and whether their writings reveal a distinctive engagement with what we may call the phonosphere. To avoid the simplifications that stem from an aestheticizing and objectifying reading of the ‘soundscape’ as a mere backdrop to urban life, and to emphasize the spatial and embodied dimensions of sonic space, the notion of the ‘phonosphere’ appears to be the most appropriate. Originating in anthropology and taken up by recent contributions in sound studies, the phonosphere does not treat sound as an objective, material entity (Kelman 2010; Hughes Dayton 2004; Caputo, Senici & Piperno 2023). It refers, according to Antonio Rostagno, to an “auditory space” (Rostagno 2023: 25), that is, a sonic space constructed and animated by its actors, a place of interactions and conflicts. The term thus makes it possible to highlight the human component of sonic environment and to shed light on the ways in which it is experienced by individuals or communities. Drawing on a corpus of published travel diaries in French and English, written by women travellers during the nineteenth century, I ask whether and how women writers articulate forms of sonic attention that depart from their male contemporaries, and how their narration of sound participates in wider discourses on place, gender and political identity.

Before turning to sonic analysis, it is necessary to outline the historical context of women’s travel to Italy in the nineteenth century and to clarify the conceptual tools deployed here – especially the choice to adopt phonosphere rather than the more widespread soundscape. Only then can we interrogate the sparse yet revealing ways in which sound surfaces within women’s travelogues. As we shall see, the question is not simply whether women listen differently, but how literary conventions, political climates and geographic imaginaries shape their acoustic perceptions.

1. From Soundscape to Phonosphere: a Methodological Premise

The term “soundscape”, coined by R. Murray Schafer in 1977, has become ubiquitous across disciplines ranging from ethnomusicology to anthropology, geography and urban studies. Yet its suitability for historical analysis has been increasingly questioned. Scholars have underscored two major critiques. First, the very notion of ‘landscape’ used to build the concept of soundscape draws upon a pictorial metaphor that privileges visuality and risks subordinating the auditory to pre-existing aesthetic categories. Second, the soundscape

¹ “But this beautiful Campanian woman, with her biblical appearance, had better not speak, because her charm would immediately vanish. A shrill, violent voice would hurt your ears, while her grand gestures would shatter all that noble balance”. Unless otherwise specified, all translations are my own.

concept tends toward objectification: it implies the existence of a sonic environment that is autonomous and externally observable, an acoustic background to be documented, preserved, or simply ignored (Caputo, Senici & Piperno 2023). Where derivation from the visual world of landscape tends to artificially dissociate the senses and to reify sound as an external environment, Ingold argues instead that sound should be understood as a medium. Sound is not perceived as an object in itself; rather, perception occurs *within* and *through* it (Ingold 2007). Consequently, the perception of sound is not a static experience, but an inherently dynamic process. Schafer's approach has also been criticized for carrying normative and ideological undertones shaped by late-twentieth-century anxieties about urbanization and global homogenization (Kelman 2010; Sterne 2014). His distinction between "hi-fi" and "lo-fi" soundscapes encoded an implicit valorisation of rural serenity and a corresponding disdain for urban noise. For historians examining the nineteenth century – that is, a moment of intense political upheaval, technical change and social reconfiguration – such a framework risks flattening the complexity of sonic experience.

For these reasons, I adopt the concept of phonosphere, which denotes no static sonic backdrop but a dynamic, contested sphere of sonic interactions (Rostagno 2023). It highlights the agency of sound-producers, speakers and listeners; it encompasses conflicts, negotiations and power relations within this shared space. Rather than treating sound as a quasi-objective environmental constant, the phonosphere centres the perceptual, affective, and social practices through which sounds are produced, interpreted and given meaning. This shift is particularly important when analysing gendered listening. If we wish to investigate whether women perceive and narrate sound differently from men, we must foreground the listening subject and the modes of agency available. The phonosphere enables such an analysis by situating sound at the intersection of sensory perception, social structures, and narrative conventions.

2. Women in Post-Grand Tour Travel: Continuities and Transformation

Throughout the nineteenth century, European travellers continued to traverse the Italian peninsula, maintaining and yet also transforming the legacy of the Grand Tour. Rome remained a fundamental destination, while Naples, Florence, and Venice attracted growing flows of visitors. New itineraries emerged as well, extending farther south toward Calabria, Puglia and especially Sicily, often perceived as the ultimate frontier of Europe (Arcara 2000). Although the social, political and economic landscapes of Italy were rapidly changing, the symbolic prestige of the Italian voyage persisted. In fact, we could say travel gradually underwent a limited form of democratization between the Napoleonic era and the unification of Italy (1861). And women were far from absent in this mobile world. This period, "situated at the crossroads of the 'great cultural tradition' of the Grand Tour [...] and the initial phase of tourism's mass expansion" (Bourguinat 2017: 23), is particularly interesting to interrogate this process of democratization and feminization of travelling. Although still costly and socially coded, the Italian journey became somewhat more accessible to middle-class women, particularly between the 1820s and 1860s (Bourguinat 2011: 2). The dangers traditionally associated with travel (ranging from moral or reputational risk to physical threats such as brigandage or volcanic activity) remained real, yet they did not prevent increasing numbers of women from embarking on the voyage.

As many studies have demonstrated in the last decades, women travellers formed a significant yet long overlooked portion of the European presence in Italy (Borghi, Livi Bacci & Treder 1988; Foster 1990; Modicat 1996; Bourguinat 2008, 2014, 2017; Gola & Vanden Berghe 2024). Already at the turn of the century, Mariana Starke emerged as a key figure: in 1800, she became the first woman to publish a guidebook to Italy, a work that would enjoy notable editorial success and be expanded across subsequent editions in 1802, 1820 and 1828. One of the few women to venture as far as Sicily, Starke did not confine herself to narrating her journey (a narrative broadly aligned with a shared European template concerned with art, architecture, and history); she provides a great quantity of practical information, ranging from food prices to the convenience of transport, thereby positioning her work as a key

precursor to the modern travel guides (Militello 2023; Chabaud, Cohen, Coquery, & Penez 2000). While relatively few women undertook the voyage entirely alone, many travelled with relatives or companions, and a considerable number published accounts of their journeys. Crucially, the number of travelogues authored by women, whether published or circulating in manuscript, rose significantly. Bourguinat notes that, by mid-century, women accounted for approximately 20% of English-language travel writings on Italy, an unprecedented proportion, reflecting a modest yet meaningful feminization of travel literature (Bourguinat 2011: 3).

Scholars have long debated whether women travellers merely reproduced the established narrative patterns crafted by male predecessors or whether they developed distinct modes of observation and interpretation. Some historians emphasize continuity, arguing that women's accounts remained largely constrained by pre-existing conventions of travel writing (Garms-Cornides 1999) – particularly the odeporic matrix centred on antiquity, art appreciation, moralizing reflection and picturesque description. Others, such as Brian Dolan, highlight the emancipatory potential of travel for women: mobility offered respite from patriarchal oversight and opened spaces for intellectual and political agency (Dolan 2002; Foster 1990). The writings of figures such as Sydney Owenson (Lady Morgan) illustrate these tensions. Lady Morgan, an influential Irish novelist and traveller, employed the Italian journey as a platform for political commentary, offering outspoken critiques of social injustice, clerical authority, and foreign domination (Abbate Badin 2016). Her engagement with Italian contemporary society suggests not only acute observation but also a willingness to intervene actively in public debates. Whether this implies an inherently gendered perceptual stance of simply different editorial and political circumstances remains an open question.

3. Sonic References: A Relative Silence?

Despite the rich scholarship on women's travel writing,² the role of sound (its perception, representation and narrative function) has received comparatively very little attention. Yet sound constituted a crucial dimension of travellers' encounters with Italian cities, landscapes, and populations. Male travellers often foregrounded sonic impressions when narrating their first contact with a place: the noise of the streets, the cries of vendors, theatrical performances, street music, and the voices of local inhabitants. Such descriptions frequently carried normative judgments encoded in aesthetic or moral registers. The Belgian diplomat Alfred Bruneel (1869), for example, deeply moved by the city of Naples, by its inhabitants and its monuments, evokes a "[...] ville bruyante et populeuse. De toutes parts les cris, les gestes animés de ce peuple, qui passe sa vie toute entière dans la rue, attirent notre attention" (211). Later he adds that his dinner in Bagnoli ended "d'une façon un peu bruyante" (228). Similarly, Stendhal (1827) famously complained about a certain Neapolitan "vivacity" and about the excessive noise in the city. The voices of its inhabitants are also perceived as very unpleasing, if not explicitly painful: "souvent, la conversation est tellement crierie, qu'elle me fait mal aux oreilles" (176-177).

Sound, for these writers, often served as an index of alterity, an audible marker of Italian temperament, morality, or disorder. How, then, do women's accounts position themselves relative to this acoustic discourse? Do they reproduce the same tropes, contest them, or remain silent on sonic matters altogether?

The first striking feature of women's published travel diaries is the relative scarcity of explicit sonic descriptions. Mariana Starke (1802) – despite her meticulous attention to churches, artworks, and climatic conditions – says almost nothing about the everyday sounds that populate Italian cities. Even when discussing theatres such as the San Carlo in Naples, she focuses on architectural features and paintings rather than musical or acoustic impressions. The notable exception occurs when she describes the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in June 1794. Here, sound becomes unavoidable: "a rumbling sound like distant thunder"; "a noise so

² See amongst others: Miller 1976; Hamalian 1981; Tinling 1989; Foster 1990; Mills 1991; Romero 1992; Modicat "Discours féminins" 1992, "Pour une bibliographie" 1992, 1994, 1996; Dolan 2002; Bourguinat 2008, 2019.

violent that it resembled a continual discharge of cannon”; “the explosion made every edifice tremble in Torre del Greco” (133). In this instance, sound appears when it breaks violently into the realm of the ordinary, when it frightens, alarms, or threatens. The vocabulary she employs draws heavily on the semantic fields of war and catastrophe. Such selective sonic attention suggests that only extraordinary or disruptive sounds were deemed narratable.

Why this relative silence regarding everyday sound? Several hypotheses may be proposed. Women travellers may have adhered to established literary expectations that prioritized visual, historical, and moral commentary over sensorial detail; they may have considered sonic description trivial or insufficiently ‘serious’, or editorial pressures may have dissuaded intimate or experiential sensory narration in favour of guide-like objectivity.

4. What Do Women Hear?

Despite the overall scarcity of sonic commentary, when sound does surface in women’s narratives it does so in ways that can be grouped – provisionally – into several recurring categories. Beyond strictly musical sounds, produced by professionals in dedicated places such as theatres, we can generally encounter sounds associated with conflict and weaponry, sounds derived from nature and tranquillity, and human voices. The predominance of one of these categories across the various travel narratives analysed imparts a particular tonal quality to the discourse. For instance, an abundance of comments on the sounds produced by weapons during military confrontations will lead the author to discuss (in varying degrees of detail) the political situation of the Peninsula. Conversely, texts that evoke almost exclusively natural sounds tend to adopt a more sensorial, aesthetic, and romantic narration of the Italian journey, drawing upon the very common trope of Italy as a land of beauty.

4.1 *The sound of conflict*

These sonic categories become particularly visible in the extensive writings of Louise Colet, a poet and intellectual from Aix-en-Provence (France), whose multi-volume account of Italy, covering the North, the Centre, and the South, also includes a rich appendix on Garibaldi and the southern campaigns. Colet’s text offers examples of every type of sonic engagement found across the corpus. However, what the French traveller most takes into account are sounds associated with conflict, war and weapons. This presence echoes in a way the exceptional presence of catastrophe in Starke’s writing and appears to be especially relevant given the tumultuous political climate of her trip, which took place in the early 1860s, that is during the civil conflict that followed the national unification. Describing Naples and its atmosphere, Colet (1863) observes: “Les hôtels regorgent de garibaldiens; on n’entend que le bruit de leurs sabres sur les dalles de marbre” (9). A few days later, while staying in Caserta, she distinctly hears through the windows of her bedroom volleys of gunfire punctuated by drumrolls (33-34). The royal troops are trying to take back the city. These sounds are not merely atmospheric: they signal political instability, the proximity of violence, and the great fragility of the new national order. The presence of these bellicose sounds in the narrative, their recurrence, and the commentary they elicit provide the traveller an opportunity to articulate her views on the political situation of the *Mezzogiorno* in the 1860s. Thus, Colet argues that

le peuple, les ouvriers, la bourgeoisie étaient heureux de leur émancipation. Pas un Napolitain n’eût voulu retomber sous le joug de ce roi taciturne qui, à vingt ans, n’avait pas un des nobles instincts de la jeunesse; quel contraste avec ce peuple pétulant, spirituel et qui semble créé pour la liberté, pour les fêtes populaires, pour les ovations de héros tels que Garibaldi et Victor-Emmanuel! (10)

In other words, the evocation of these war sounds enables the author to affirm, in her view, the legitimacy of the unification enterprise and the popular consent enjoyed by national unity in the south of the country, despite the claims of certain detractors. In this regard, these

sounds of conflict constitute a brutal irruption of politics into the narrative, a concrete and sensory intrusion that justifies and legitimizes Colet's intervention on the political context of the Peninsula and on the popular reception of the Risorgimento.

4.2 *A peaceful and quiet nature*

Yet, this first category of sounds participate in a long-standing association between extraordinary sound and rupture, a motif already noted in Starke's eruption narrative. Nature-related sounds seem to offer a different perspective on sonic irruptions within the narrative, this time within a framework of normality rather than, as in the case of war or volcanic eruption, one of exceptionality. First of all, we can underline the prevalence, in women's texts, of nature-related sounds rather than of urban noise. While travelling in Venetia, near Bassano, George Sand (1837) evokes for Musset the silent yet swift flow of the Brenta, which runs through the hills (12). In the proximity of the Oliero cave, Sand compares "le silence de la nuit" and "la solitude de ces montagnes" to a form of "temple" (25). Nature is often associated with the absence of sound, with a form of harmonious silence that at times assumes a sacred character ("le silence de ces nuits enchantées", 64), and at others an unsettling or melancholic one.

Le murmure de la Brenta, un dernier gémissement du vent dans le feuillage lourd des oliviers, des gouttes de pluie qui se détachaient des branches et tombaient sur les rochers avec un petit bruit qui ressemblait à celui d'un baiser, je ne sais quoi de triste et de tendre, était répandu dans l'air et soupirait dans les plantes (21).

Also in Venetia, more precisely in Venice, Colet (1862) repeatedly mentions the murmurs of the sea, the rustling of wind, the pattering of rain. Such sounds are usually described as soothing or enveloping: "Le soir, toujours la pluie accompagnée de rafales; impossible de sortir; le bruit de la lagune m'endort" (188).

More than any other category, silence figures prominently in women's travel writing. Silence is rarely neutral: it is, in the travellers' texts, associated with tranquillity, introspection, and the uncanny beauty of deserted places. Colet's description of a fog-covered Venice – "Venise [...] déserte et plus silencieuse que de coutume sous ce frimas" – presents silence as both soothing and monumental, capable of enveloping the traveller in a state of serene detachment: "l'absence de tout bruit berce mieux qu'un chant; je m'endormis ce soir-là d'un sommeil profond" (234). Even snow – a paradigmatically silent meteorological phenomenon – is described through its soundlessness: "la neige tombait sans bruit" (89). We might argue that, in Colet's text, silence is not configured as the absence of sound, but rather as a generative condition of listening, including inner listening (Voegelin 2010). Silence and natural sounds thus emerge as an essential component of the female-phonospheric imaginary. The contrast between noisy political upheaval and the calming regularity of natural sound underscores a thematic duality within women's listening and narrating practices, making out of the writing a space of refuge from political turmoil and urban agitation.

4.3 *Italians as a Festive and Musical People*

Human sounds constitute the third category of heard and commented sounds in women's accounts. Voices often appear as collective sonic masses rather than as descriptors of individual character. Just as their male counterparts, women travellers frequently comment on musical evenings, performances and ceremonial fanfares. Mary Shelley (1844) remembers the *Mosè* heard in Bergamo (107-108); the Austrian traveller Ida Pfeiffer (1852) comments on the "particular performance" seen at the San Carlo of Naples (293); Lady Morgan evokes a Rossinian *Othello* in Rome (Owenson 1821: 445). The same Lady Morgan particularly deplores the "disgraceful state of the Argentina theatre", which she describes – italicising the term in the text – as an "immondezzaio", she refers to the Romans' desire to see the theatre restored and enhanced by the addition of a frontal portico, and remarks upon the

surprisingly strict discipline prevailing within the Roman theatre, where, “on the first murmur the offender is seized by the police or guards, with which the theatre is filled (for the most military government in Europe is the Pope’s)” (Owenson 1821: 444-445). Yet, even here, the descriptions remain impressionist rather than technical: there is very little discussion of vocal technique, orchestral quality or acoustics, in contrast to the often meticulous musical judgments found in male narratives. Stendhal, to cite but one example, systematically includes in his accounts of musical evenings one or two sentences on the performer’s bravura and on the specific qualities of their voices. At La Scala, he writes that Galli is “un des meilleurs acteurs” he has ever encountered and that he has “la plus belle voix de basse” he has ever heard (Stendhal 1827: 3). Similarly, Dickens remains deeply impressed by the discernment of the Italian audience at the Teatro Carlo Felice in Genoa, which detects and comments even on the slightest flaw in the performances of actors and actresses when a “second-rate opera company” is on stage (Dickens 1846: 67). In women travellers’ accounts, it would seem that the descriptions of these musical moments are more often the occasion for a reflection on Italian habits and society or for an architectural description.

Colet also describes some musical gatherings but from another perspective. About the music rising from illuminated gardens in Naples and Genoa, she notes its capacity to structure collective emotion and urban space: “En Italie, la musique attire toujours la foule. La musique est pour tous la voix des sentiments et des enthousiasmes; elle fait vibrer de cœur en cœur et les communique comme par un courant électrique” (Colet 1862: 60). This observation, which restores the sonic universe to the heart of social practices, resonates with a trope that was at the time extremely widespread in discourses on Italy and the Italians. Indeed, in the age of essays on national characters, Italians were depicted from all quarters (by physicians, poets, diplomats and writers alike) as beings naturally endowed with musicality (Frigau Manning 2017). Mary Shelley as well, when staying in Como, affirms the natural qualities of some Italians staying in their hotel: “the hotel at Como were staying some Italians, whose singing, however, far transcended that of the theatre” (Shelley 1844: 91). And, she adds about one particular man, “perhaps no finer voice than his has been heard in a theatre for many years”, confirming the superiority of innate musicality confronted to the long and demanding technical training of the professional (Shelley 1844: 91). In the same register, she also observes the way young girls working in the silk mills of Como region used to “laugh and sing at their work [...] in chorus with loud, well-tuned voices” (Shelley 1844: 97-98).

Yet the focus is not on the timbre or expressivity of specific voices (as we see in many male travel accounts), but on the diffuse presence of a certain vocality, perceived as an innate quality. Sound seems to index social gathering and national character rather than individual identity. Indeed, music and urban festivity occupy a considerable portion of sonic references, expectedly so given Italy’s centrality to operatic and folkloristic culture within the European imagination of the nineteenth century.

5. North and South: Geopolitical Variations in Sonic Perception

Before concluding, one final consideration deserves to be made. All the elements discussed present a form of variation linked to the geographical factor. A quick comparison through lexicometrics across the three volumes of Colet’s work reveals clear geographic variation in sonic attention. In the volume dedicated to southern Italy, the term *bruit* (“noise”) appears 31 times across 378 pages, most often in relation to armed conflict, voices, or music. In the volume dedicated to northern Italy, by contrast, the term only appears 24 times across 438 pages, with a strong emphasis on silence, comforting natural sounds, and the metaphorical use of *bruit* to denote news, rumours, and, consequently, high society’s activities and discourses.

Vocal descriptions, in particular, vary geographically. In northern contexts – especially within capitals such as Milan, Venice and Turin – voices tend to be associated with artistic cultivation: opera singers, poets, public orators. These voices are presented as “puissantes”, “fières”, or imbued with aesthetic value. In the South (particularly Naples, Calabria, and Sicily) voices more frequently appear as cries, shouts, chants, or elemental forces (such as

the “voix du volcan”). They are intertwined with the tumult of the street, with children’s calls, with the sonic vibrancy that male travellers often did not hesitate to frame as unruly or exotic.³

Recent research in linguistic geography has even suggested that climate and geography may shape the very sound structure of languages (Wang, Wichmann, Xia, & Ran 2023) — yet the regional variation observed in women’s travelogues must be understood primarily as reflecting long-standing geopolitical imaginaries rather than environmental determinism. Northern Italy, closer to Austria, Switzerland, and France, was often coded as more orderly, disciplined, and ‘European’, while the South was often represented as passionate, chaotic, or primitive. These considerations form part of what, following Edward Said’s reflections on Orientalism, has been defined as ‘neo orientalism’ (Moe 2002). As Jane Schneider writes in *Italy’s Southern Question*:

Within the northern hemisphere, travellers voyaging from north to south in earlier centuries typically commented on differences of climate and sometimes invented elaborate theories relating climate and topography to the ‘character’ of the peoples they encountered. They also often reacted to the visibility of poverty and squalor in southern city streets [...]. Italy was certainly affected by Orientalism. For, although the imperial powers of the north did not envision the Italian peninsula as a land they had to colonize – its inhabitants were European Christians, after all – it was nevertheless their goal that Italian resources and products circulate freely in international markets, that Italian markets be open to English and French manufactures, and that Italian élites share in and support the world civilizational system that these powers believed it was their prerogative to create. As such they critically scrutinized the divergent politics of the peninsula on the eve of their unification in 1860, much to the disadvantage of the Neapolitan Kingdom of the Two Sicilies that governed the southern region and Sicily (Schneider 1998: 9-10).

We could say that such imaginaries, and the existence of a certain intra-national orientalism, contributed to shaping women’s acoustic expectations and interpretations, even in the absence of overtly gendered listening. The phonosphere of Naples or Palermo was thus not merely heard but anticipated, imagined, and sometimes feared through inherited cultural stereotypes.

Conclusion

Based on this preliminary survey, it is difficult to assert that women narrated sound in fundamentally different ways from those of their male counterparts. Rather, women’s writings reveal a more marginal and understated incorporation of sound. But one might, perhaps, identify a form of feminine characterization in the dual emphasis, on the one hand, on the sounds of war – highlighted precisely because they lie outside the everyday sensory experience of most nineteenth-century women – and, on the other hand, on the sounds of nature, which align instead with a conventional stereotype of a femininity associated with the idea of nature, also in line with readers’ expectations of a travel narrative authored by a woman. The sonic dimension tends to appear at the periphery of the narratives – evoked briefly, often subordinated to visual or political commentary and almost never applied to individuals in a negative or judgmental way (except for, perhaps, opera singers). When sound is described, it is often to situate a broader context rather than to define individuals, urban or local identities, or even national character. One explanation for this restraint lies in the constraints of the odeporic genre itself. Travel writing, especially when destined for publication, imposed expectations of seriousness, restraint, and adherence to established narrative frameworks. Women authors may have felt compelled to minimize subjective sensory impressions in favour of descriptive authority, moral reflection or political analysis.

This exploratory study suggests that women travellers’ engagement with the Italian

³ See, for example, Guislain 1840: 186.

phonosphere in the nineteenth century is characterized less by overt gendered specificity than by subtle narrative patterns shaped by genre, geography, and political climate. Sound appears rarely but meaningfully, emerging primarily in moments of rupture (war, catastrophe), environmental immersion (the sea, the rain, the silence), or collective festivity (music, voices). Women's writings reveal a nuanced but restrained acoustic awareness – one that favours contextualization over essentialization and silence over sonic stereotyping. Future research expanding the corpus to include a greater number of sources, unpublished correspondence, journals and travellers of other linguistic backgrounds may further illuminate the complex interplay between gender, mobility, and the sonic perception. For now, the notion of the phonosphere offers a productive framework for analysing how these women inhabited and narrated the acoustic worlds of nineteenth-century Italy.

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