

Noise and the Other in Rumaan Alam's *Leave the World Behind*

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This article engages with noise studies to foreground its importance in the perception and the creation of the Other in Rumaan Alam's *Leave the World Behind* (2020). The essay draws from Michel Serres's *The Parasite* (2007) and Marie Thompson's *Beyond Unwanted Sound* (2017) to contend that the pairing sound/noise structures the characters' response to difference and alterity. While initially pitting sound against noise and English against Spanish, the article goes on to show how those pairings are impossible to maintain as the novel moves from notions of the Other as noise to those of the self as noise. Although initially associated with the externality and vulnerability attributed to a Spanish-speaking woman stranded by the side of the road, noise then takes center stage, becoming a parasitic presence that restructures reality and creates a void in signification. The analysis provided here leads to the conclusion that the errantry of noise dismantles protocols of ordering and labeling and creates new configurations of power. There is no longer self *vs* Other, inside *vs* outside, belonging *vs* non-belonging, as noise has spread vulnerability and relationality.

Keywords: Noise; Other; Language; hospitality; Rumaan Alam

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El ruido y el Otro en *Leave the World Behind*, de Rumaan Alam

Este artículo aborda los estudios del ruido para poner de relieve su importancia en la percepción y la creación del Otro en *Leave the World Behind* (2020), de Rumaan Alam. Este trabajo se basa en *The Parasite* (2007), de Michel Serres, y *Beyond Unwanted Sound* (2017), de Marie Thompson, para afirmar que el par sonido/ruido estructura la respuesta de los personajes a la diferencia y la alteridad. Si bien al comienzo contrasta el sonido frente al ruido y el inglés frente al español, el artículo muestra a continuación cómo tales emparejamientos son

imposibles de mantener a medida que la novela conduce al lector desde las nociones del Otro como ruido a las del yo como ruido. Aunque inicialmente aparece asociado a la externalidad y vulnerabilidad que Clay atribuye a una mujer hispanohablante que encuentra junto a la carretera, el ruido asume poco a poco un papel protagonista hasta convertirse en una presencia parasitaria que reestructura la realidad y crea un vacío de significación. El análisis que se proporciona nos permite concluir que el carácter errático del ruido desmantela los protocolos de ordenamiento y etiquetado y crea nuevas configuraciones de poder. Ha dejado de existir un yo frente al Otro, un adentro frente a un afuera, una sensación de pertenencia frente a otra de no pertenencia, debido a que el ruido ha diseminado vulnerabilidad y relacionalidad.

Palabras clave: ruido; el Otro; lenguaje; hospitalidad, Rumaan Alam

But who exactly possesses [language]? And whom does it possess? Is language in possession, ever a possession or possessed possession? Possessed or possessing in exclusive possession, like a piece of personal property? What of this being at home [*être-chez-soi*] in language toward which we never cease returning?

Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism and the Other*

Language this side of the Pyrenees, parasite on the other. Sound on this side, din on the other. Their language is only noise, barbaric rumblings. Clarity here, darkness there.

Michel Serres, *The Parasite*

In “Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe,” Paul Ricoeur coins the term “narrative hospitality” to refer to the opening of the self to the story of the Other. The Other does not come alone, Ricoeur claims, but has verbal and narrative baggage, and it is crucial to take responsibility “in imagination and in sympathy for the story of the other, through the life narratives which concern the other” (1996, 7). Ricoeur’s narrative welcome contrasts with Derrida’s vision of language as a key factor in the definition of the Other. For the latter, language is the medium through which the host enfolds the Other into the internal law of the *oikos*, of the *chez soi*. The host, claims Derrida, “tends to begin by dictating the law of its language and its own acceptance of the sense of words, which is to say, its own concepts as well” (2000, 7). The language of the host, then, determines the view of the Other, the migrant or the foreigner, and creates linguistic categories and taxonomies that not only shape the verbal exchange with the Other but also construct the Other. If language is a home, those who do not possess the language of the host country will always be characterized as part of the outside, as “dispersed beings,” to use Gaston Bachelard’s expression in *The Poetics of Space* (1994). The host’s

language creates regimes of meaning and signification as it establishes parameters of belonging in order to distinguish self/Other; the domestic/strange; the pure/infected; sound/noise. Whatever is not sound—the barbaric continuum of indistinguishable and unmappable rumblings uttered by the Other—is categorized as noise. Michel Serres's vision of noise, as developed in *The Parasite*, slips between Ricoeur's notion of narrative hospitality and Derrida's vision of the host as the possessor of language and introduces a third element, one impossible to do without, one which, like the parasite, becomes the unavoidable guest, the static that accompanies every act of verbal communication.

This article engages with the centrality of noise to claim that the verbal construction of the Other as noise is paramount in Rumaan Alam's recent novel *Leave the World Behind* (2020). Half-way between a comedy of manners wrapped around a disaster plot and a thriller, as critics have noted, the novel stands as an example of dystopian literature (Shapiro 2020; Shreve 2020). Alam wrote the novel before the 2020 pandemic that has radically changed the world as we knew it. That feat of intuition gives this dystopian novel a premonitory dimension, and it provides a "vision of an entirely plausible future" (Gwinn 2020) characterized by generalized panic (Preston 2020) where isolation inside the domestic space against an invisible source of danger seems the only option. Alam taps into this anxiety cocktail, a combination of fears about the climate, inequality, racism and our over-reliance on technology (Preston 2020), as well as the prevailing notion that "our institutions are less stable than we thought, in the UK, in the US, [and] around the world" (Silcox 2020). The author of two previous novels, *Rich and Pretty* (2016) and *That Kind of Mother* (2018), Alam demonstrated a knack for chronicling contemporary life with an acidic wit (Atakora 2021) that continues in *Leave the World Behind*. What initially looks like a Norman Rockwell family vacation at an Air B&B rental house in a secluded part of rural Long Island turns into a nightmarish experience that approximates the novel to Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and, as if in conversation, to DeLillo's *The Silence*. The pairing silence/noise gives expression to the overwhelming sense of dread that comes about when a cataclysmic event unfolds in both these novels. What distinguishes Alam's novel, though, is its careful modulation of the concept of noise and its relocation from the margins to the center of the characters' lives.

As the consequences of a blackout starts to unfold, Clay, the male protagonist, encounters a Spanish-speaking woman by the side of the road. In a direct and natural continuity with the law of the land, his language initially appears as the language of power, which is tantamount to being "the one who has the source of emission of sound," and "the strongest and loudest voice [which] is always right" (Serres 2007, 141). If we apply Serres's conceptualization it is possible to claim that Clay's sound contrasts with what he perceives as the Spanish-speaking woman's gibberish or noise. Alam thus goes back to one of thematic cores of Postcolonial theory: noise tends to be associated with "the Other," "and certain types of bodies and spaces are commonly associated with noise" (Deumert in Bongartz & Storch 2016, 156; Thompson 2017, 28). While Clay's sound has a positive valence and is associated with order and belonging, the woman's alleged noise

signifies a lack, and is associated with disorder, confusion, externality and non-belonging. Drawing from Michel Serres's *The Parasite* (2007) and Marie Thomson's *Beyond Unwanted Sound* (2017) as a theoretical framework, this article posits that noise studies provides an appropriate lens through which to examine the intersection of race, class and language as it traces how the pairing sound/noise shapes the perception of difference, disorder and alterity in the novel. Its premise is that Alam goes beyond the association between the Other and noise to transform this lesser form of sound into the backbone of the novel, as it gradually restructures fixed positions such as host and guest, belonging and not belonging, the outside and the inside, self and Other. Herein lies the power of noise and its agency in the novel, in its ability to replace a world of fixed identities with a "world of becoming: a world in which everything moves with transformative encounters among entities" (Ozguç 2020, 83). That noise takes center stage in the novel happens only fitfully, for the morphology of noise, its constant movement and externality, brings to the fore the traits of a new normal where nothing stays put and identities undergo a constant transformation that allows for new configurations. I intend to illustrate this unavoidable state of transition in three stages, starting with the most widely accepted view of noise and its association with the Other, through the irruption of the big noise that unleashes a void in signification, to the conceptualization of the self as noise that Alam posits at the end of the novel. These modulations open the scope for future research, as they illustrate the transformative power of noise and its ability to create new relations between self and Other. Noise, the article claims, goes against the effects of ordering and labeling because it introduces new configurations, new movements and displacements that escape what Jason Snart calls "dogmatic kinds of closures" (2001, n.p.).

1. NOISE STUDIES: NOISE AS METHOD

According to the *On-Line Etymology Dictionary*, noise may derive from Latin *nausea*, "disgust, annoyance, discomfort," literally "seasickness"; it may also come from Latin *noxia* "hurting, injury, damage." In contrast, the *Old English Dictionary* considers that "the sense of the word is against both suggestions." It is only fitting that noise remains that way, slippery and impossible to pin down. An essential part of every system, noise for Michel Serres in *The Parasite* is not an assault or an affront to the rational but part of what makes a mechanism work. As he states: "A system is often described as harmony [...]. Yet we know of no system that functions perfectly, that is to say, without losses, flights, wear and tear, errors, accidents, opacity—a system whose return is one for one, where the yield is maximal, and so forth" (2007, 12-13). Rather, the system works "because it does not work" (13). Noise, in Serres's depiction, is the parasitic element, the always already there, for it is present in every aspect of order making. For every attempt at creating a neat, orderly and rational system there will always be a parallel process of noise making, as Serres remarks: "The very production of order, secretion, the organism itself undertaking production, are all struggling to exit, struggling

against a never-ending noise, against being dragged down toward the mortal fate of mixtures" (87). Standing between source and signal, "[n]oise perturbs the signal during transmission, potentially inducing error, miscommunication or extraneous artefacts-distortion, glitches, crackles, hiss etc. In doing so, it ensures that the signal sent and the signal received differ" (Thompson 2017, 51). Far from detracting from the signal emitted, noise adds to the informative content of the signal and, in so doing, is a key agent of transformation, for "[i]n order for there to be any kind of relationship between sender and receiver, some form of noise or interference, that is, an injection of difference, is required" (Brown 2002, 8). Difference, therefore, is always part of the signal. As Thompson expresses it:

The greater the presence of noise—which is to say, the more interference, interruptions or perturbations to which the signal is exposed—the greater the information (i.e. uncertainty) in a signal's reception. Conversely if a message was to travel through a noiseless channel, remaining unchanged and unaffected by the transmission process, then there would be no information: the message would be entirely predictable (2002, 51).¹

This centrality of noise in the conveyance of a signal or message as spelled out by Serres contrasts with traditional views of communication, which situate unwanted noise as the direct opposite of wanted signal, thus establishing a set of binaries such as comprehensible/incomprehensible; regular/irregular; signal/noise. Noise, as an inferior category, stands as a secondary and derivative phenomenon, "consequently, it is negatively constituted, only existing as the antithesis of a superior category" (Thompson 2017, 44). From this perspective, "noise is defined by a lack—a lack of organization, significance, information, purpose, specificity, desirability" (44). The semantic lack is morphologically explicit in the way noise is defined by what Thompson terms its "unness," such as "unwanted, unpermitted, undesirable, unintentional or unorganized. Alternatively, noise can be conceived as that which remains when signification is subtracted" (44). Following Serres's conceptualization of noise, Marie Thompson reassesses these binaries, or dyadic relations, in order to develop a relational approach and "complicate noise's connection to dualist pairings, and, by extension, the correlation of noise, 'unwantedness' and 'badness'" (44-45). Thompson dwells upon this negative categorization as well as the mental process that causes it. For a noise to be thought of as bad or as unwanted there is the need for a listener that discerns and decides what noise is and what it is not. There is perception and a subsequent evaluation. This is what Thompson defines as a subject-oriented definition, as opposed to an object-oriented definition, which concentrates on sonic features irrespective of the listener (25). Thompson's conceptualizations allow us to look at Alam's novel and see how the

¹ There are significant similarities between the role of noise in information theory and that of movement and energy in thermodynamics. Noise, for example, figures prominently in Pynchon's short story "Entropy." See Jason Snart's article "Entropy in Pynchon's 'Entropy' and Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*."

writer provides examples of both types, from the subjective perception of noise based on the *a priori* definition of the Other—the Spanish-speaking woman Clay encounters by the side of the road—to the objective description of a noise, unannounced and parasitic in nature, that creates a void and an emptiness in meaning and signification. From being chased out from the cycle of communication, noise in *Leave the World Behind* becomes the essential part of the message. Alam gradually concentrates on the effects of noise as the novel slowly reveals its centrality in the characters' lives, from a distinct knock on the door at night through the perception of Spanish as noise, the big noise that follows, to end with the realization that the self is the source of noise. This constant shifting confirms “the intersubjectivity of noise, its constant oscillation, its productivity, its generative force, and its potential to disturb the order of things” (Ozguç 2020, 82).

2. GEARING UP FOR NOISE: A KNOCK ON THE DOOR

What is this sudden dangerous noise at the door that prevents me from finishing and leads me to other actions?

Michel Serres, *The Parasite*

After a day at the beach, Clay, his wife Amanda, together with their teenage daughter and son, Rose and Archie, are relaxing after dinner when the couple struggle to describe what they hear: “A disruption, a change. Something” (2020, 31). Eventually they cannot deny they are hearing a noise and finally identify it as a knock on the door. Its unexpected quality, uninvited and parasitic, provides more information than its acoustic features. It is a knock all right, but a knock at the door of a house “where no one knew they were, not even the global positioning system” (32). Although initially Amanda determines that the only response to this intrusion from the outside is violence, when Clay finally opens the door, they find a middle-aged African American couple, Ruth and George Washington (who goes by the initials GH). Well-dressed, cautious and well-spoken, the arrival of the couple adds the question of race to a configuration of awkward hospitality that recalls Sidney Poitier's classic performance in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* (Silcox 2020). The unexpected guests claim that they are the owners of the rental house. They explain there has been a black-out in Manhattan, where they live, and ask their tenants to let them stay in the house while the situation is assessed, or until they can return to their home in the city. As the bearers of ill tidings, the arrival of the couple resituates and redistributes the roles of hosts and guests within the house. Not in vain the word *hôte* in French, like the Spanish *huésped*, means both host and guest. But the unexpected encounter also evidences the boundaries of race and class that structure the minds of the liberal middle-class the white couple belong to. Amanda, for example, is suspicious that GH might be the handyman and Ruth might be the maid. After all, they did not look “like the sort to own such a beautiful

house" (2020, 51). Such comments, as critics have noted, are perfect examples of white privilege and entitlement (Shapiro 2020) under the guise of being liberal Americans.

The simultaneous occupation of the same premises brings a feeling of eeriness to the house, a blurring of roles between occupants and owners, as guests turn into reluctant hosts, and the two parties agree on a rational refund for what for now looks like a half-spoiled vacation. In bringing that sense of disruption to clearly defined spaces and roles, *Leave the World Behind* reads like Alam's rewriting of Joyce Carol Oates's "Where is Here?" This time, the feeling of uncertainty and eeriness comes not only from the stranger revisiting the house he used to live in, but also from the unknown consequences of the blackout on the East Coast. The shutdown in communication networks, initially attributable to the storm, is just the first manifestation of what looks like a cataclysm of unknown proportions which the omniscient narrative voice gradually reveals. Once the noise on the other side of the door parasitically invades the house and the tenants' lives, the sense of not knowing what is really going on settles in. The uncertainty is especially acute for the men in the story. Clay is a professor of English and Media Studies ("The internet. The truth, that kind of thing" [2020, 82], as Amanda explains to Ruth); GH manages money, a job that gravitates around information (89). The blackout leaves them with power but no satellite TV and no phone service. Amanda receives alerts on her phone: the blackout, a hurricane and then just gibberish. It is clear that information has become meaningless. In trying to imagine the dimensions of the blackout, they can only think of Hurricane Sandy and its disruptions, a power outage that was experienced as more like a "charming" emergency (60); the 2003 Blackout and, of course, 9/11. In the absence of traditional channels of information, other tokens become meaningful, such as the silent yet massive gathering of deer outside the house that the couple's daughter, Rose, is witness to (77), and later, the flamingos splashing in the pool (179).

3. SPANISH AS NOISE: NOISE AND THE OTHER

Our collective is the expulsion of the stranger, of the enemy, of the parasite.

Michel Serres, *The Parasite*

It becomes crucial to find out what has happened, and Clay decides to drive into town, buy a newspaper and assess the situation. There is no-one out and he drives around lost, but he sees a woman who then flags him down. Before sound comes into the scene, Clay registers the outer signs of class and ethnic difference: "She was wearing a white polo shirt and khaki pants. On some women it would have looked like leisure wear, but on this woman, her face a broad, indigenous shape (ancient blood, timeless dignity), it looked like a uniform" (2020, 115). For Clay, the woman, most likely, is a stranded maid. The interaction between the two further emphasizes the distance between their respective languages. To his chirpy "Hello, there!" the woman replies with another hello and then begins speaking very quickly in Spanish. Although Clay hates to

admit it, it sounds like “gibberish. He didn’t speak any other languages. Clay didn’t even like to attempt it. It made him feel like a fool, or a child” (115). This off-hand comment on the part of the omniscient narrator provides a clear insight into the way Clay looks at the woman. Once her body is marked as Other, it is no surprise that for him she automatically becomes a noise source, a “noisemaker” incapable of meaningful utterances. In Clay’s linguistic taxonomy, Spanish is viewed as unintelligible or meaningless. Accordingly, the woman is seen as someone linguistically, racially and socially incomprehensible, someone who cannot make sense and cannot speak other than gibberish. Clay has automatically enfolded the woman into the law of the *oikos*, his *chez soi*. She is immediately resignified as out of place and as ontologically different and worthless. Like noise, she is defined as a lack, what Thompson defines as her “un-ness” (2017, 44), as explained before: she is unwanted, unpermitted, undesirable, uninvited, unintelligent.

In his depiction of the encounter between English and Spanish, Alam follows similar literary examples in contemporary literature, from Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* and Junot Díaz’s “Invierno,” to Helena Viramontes’s “The Cariboo Café.” Far from creating hospitable linguistic spaces, these instances illustrate that, as Serres suggests, “[t]he laws of hospitality become laws of hostility” (2007, 56). Jesús Benito Sánchez has illustrated how Viramontes presents this rapid mutation when an unnamed woman in “The Cariboo Café” enters the premises and the owner immediately categorizes her as “bad news.” When he hears the lady saying something in Spanish, he conceptualizes the woman as illegal, which, for him, “explains why she looks like a weirdo” (Viramontes 1995, 70). There is no room for narrative hospitality, and the story of the Other is rejected as not belonging. As host, the café owner dictates the law of his language and automatically imposes his concepts and world visions, to go back to Derrida. In Jesús Benito Sánchez’s assessment, Spanish, like the woman herself, is “just noise,” “another disturber of the peace and order” (2018, 58) that needs to be narratively extracted and silenced. Clay’s assessment of Spanish, like that of the café owner in Viramontes’s story, can be further illuminated through Thompson’s elaboration of noise *vs* sound. In this case, Clay is the listener that interprets Spanish as gibberish. As Paul Hegarty states, “Noises are sounds until further qualified (e.g., as unpleasant noises, loud noises, and so on) but noise is already that qualification; it is already a *judgement* that noise is occurring” (2007, 3). The constitution of noise thus follows a two-step sequence: “First, there is the perception of sound by a listener; and secondly, there is the judgement of the perceived sound as unwanted and, by extension, ‘bad’” (Thompson 2017, 18). By establishing as noise what is initially just a sound, Alam allows us glimpses into the process of the creation of the Other from a linguistic perspective. Just as the border creates a here *vs* there, this side *vs* that side, the dyad noise/language creates similar sides and areas of exclusion. Mary Pat Brady captures the ability of the border to classify peoples when she claims that the border “works in part as an abjection machine—transforming people into ‘aliens,’ ‘illegals,’ ‘wetbacks,’

or 'undocumented,' and thereby rendering them unintelligible (and unintelligent), ontologically impossible, outside the real and the human" (2002, 50). Significantly, language can have a similar effect. In not speaking English, the woman is seen as a fool, as a child, as if situated in a less sophisticated temporality. She is just a source of or the cause of noise. As Thompson explains: "To be 'mere' noise is to be worthless, incomprehensible, extraneous, ugly or unpleasant" (2017, 28). This causal approach overlaps the subject and object-oriented definitions of noise and directly points to the correlation between noise and bodies marked as "Other" (27). There is, Thompson remarks, "the characterization of 'foreigners' as noisy" (28). This is Clay's automatic assessment upon hearing the woman speak in Spanish.

The woman keeps talking, barely taking a breath, for she has something urgent to say. So urgent that perhaps, the narrative voice ventures, she has forgotten the English she did have, words such as "hello" and "thank you," or the instrumental "Windex," a glass cleaner. The three examples are significant, for the words mark both the nature of her limited interactions with her employers and her marginalization in the English-speaking world. In the midst of her hurried monologue, Clay can only interject an "I am sorry." Not because he is sorry, the omniscient narrator clarifies, but because he does not understand and does not want to understand. The unwillingness is associated with his position as being in place. He speaks the language of the land, the language of the host, and hence does not need to decipher the language of an instrumental guest, a maid, a domestic servant. Clay's linguistic location, the centrality of his place of elocution, allows him not to make the effort: "Like the master/host, a host language derives its power from the place it is spoken, from being *chez soi*, as well as from a community of peers that defines it as the majority language. Whatever does not sound organically native and pertaining to the land is deemed illegal, marginal or backward" (Benito Sánchez 2018, 58). The woman's attempt at communicating thus amounts to din or noise, as opposed to utterances that have meaning from the listener's point of view. However, this hierarchical relationship between "wanted" signal and "unwanted" noise is complicated in the encounter, for each of the speakers knows some words of the other's language, as the narrator comments: "But maybe he comprehended. Oh, that was a word: *comprende*. They said it in movies. You couldn't live in this country and not know some Spanish" (2020, 116). At the same time, the woman does have some English, words that he could have stitched together to create a narrative and lay down the ground for communication: "He heard *beer* but she said *deer*; they sound alike in both tongues. She said more. She said *telephone*, but he didn't understand. She said *electric*, but he didn't hear" (116). In his misunderstanding and mishearing of what the woman says, her perfectly pertinent and communicative English words are confused with other words that do not fit the context of the conversation, and are immediately transformed into more gibberish, into more noise. The woman's weeping and her speaking louder culminate when she puts her hands on Clay's car and holds on to the window. The scene posits inside *vs* outside, certainty and sound *vs* uncertainty and noise. As the narrative

voice claims, the woman's fear and urgency did not need translation. She is simply making a moral claim upon Clay he did not ask for and is not ready to accept. Hence his need to put an end to this human contact that needs no language: "[H]e was panicked, and she was panicking him. He concludes with "No Spanish" (116). He rolls up the window, as a glass border between them, and drives away.

Although he desperately tries to appear impermeable to the woman's vulnerability, hers is an interpellation that he is not free to refuse (Cf. Butler 2004, 131), as the rest of the novel reveals. The woman's alleged noise creates a disruption in the system and power relations, and, in the process, will generate "encounters and new relations that operate within and beyond existing power relations" (Ozguç 2020, 78). Clay's panic is the first symptom of the new interpersonal configuration. His fear, however, does not seem to stem from the ineradicable difference he initially attributes to the woman, but from similarity. Her being stranded, vulnerable, completely alone and unable to communicate is an intimation of the major cataclysm Clay is only starting to glean. As the narrative voice reveals, her people "invented astronomy, language, trade. Then they'd ceased to be. Now their descendants shucked the corn they'd been the first to know about, and vacuumed rugs and watered decorative beds of lavender planted poolside at mansions in the Hamptons" (116). That sense of reversal, the sudden change of fortune that dismantles the linear logic of progress and prosperity suddenly starts to take shape in Clay's mind. His panic seems to come from the sense that there is no protection from the exteriority and vulnerability he instinctively assigns to her. Whatever certainty Clay was looking for, that reassuring piece of information he needed to take back to Amanda and his "host" family back in the house, is no longer available. Uncertainty and noise become the only certainty and, as the novel unfolds, they take center stage. His reaction to the woman's interpellation, to her "noise," will echo throughout the rest of the novel. She is, in a way, a harbinger of the big noise to come.

4. THE BIG NOISE

In the beginning there is the noise; the noise never stops. It is our apperception of chaos, our apprehension of disorder, our only link to the scattered distribution of things.

Michel Serres, *The Parasite*

If the initial knock on the door ushers in a parasitic and unwanted noise that Amanda and Clay struggle to define, the disruption turns out to be simply a dress-rehearsal for the major noise that shocks the characters on their third day at the house. Rather than a subject-oriented noise that relies on the listener, this is "an object-oriented" one that centers on its "particular sonic qualities, properties or attributes, rather than in relation to the ear of the beholder" (Thompson 2017, 23). Those acoustic features, however, seem to be unmappable, and escape the realm of the word "noise," as the narrative

voice asserts: "Noise was an insufficient noun, or maybe noise was always impossible to describe in words"; This was a noise, yes, but one so loud that it was almost a physical presence, so sudden because there was no precedent (126). This is noise that exists as pure message, loud enough to remap and alter the characters' definition of the word. The noise remains in the air for what the characters think is a long time and it is powerful enough to become a reference in their lives, a before and after the noise. Like another big bang the noise marks the fulcrum, the turning point, the entry into a different existence: "Something had happened, something was happening, it was ongoing, the noise was a confirmation even as the noise was a mystery" (126-27). This indeterminacy or somethingness is tied to the fact that this is noise without an origin, a noise that does not have a particular source or target. There is no causal perspective on it and no listener-oriented perception. This is simply objective noise. The absence of origin or genesis explains why for Emilija Talijan, "noise is itself a migratory event" with its own "errantry and movement. Noise is constantly on the move, propagating itself in space, interrupting and insinuating itself, drawing attention at once to the here where it is sounding, and the faceless or unidentified there from which it is arriving" (2019, 25). If the here and the there are the adverbs of place that, for Gaston Bachelard "have been promoted to the rank of an absolutism" (1994, 212), noise disregards their seemingly "unsupervised powers of ontological determinism" (212). There is no hierarchy between them, as noise makes them part of the same continuum. Similarly, and as part of the disruption, noise upsets the separation between inside/outside and the private/public spheres. There is no protection from this so-called noise, for it dismantles the feeling of safety one might feel from being in a car or inside a house. In Thompson's words, noise "features as an invasion from the outside that threatens to disrupt the domestic order as it has been established by those who belong (i.e. the family unit)" (2017, 22). This dismantling of categories harks back to Clay's encounter with the Spanish-speaking woman. If Clay initially categorizes her as a source of noise or gibberish, a disturbing presence exterior to his life and circumstances, Alam now situates noise at the center of the novel, a repositioning that restructures the characters' roles.

The spatial remapping of the here/there, inside/outside, origin/target intrinsic to the migrational quality of noise is paralleled on the semantic level. There is, the omniscient narrator comments, no name for this "something," the metastasized result of the initial storm (2020, 120). The noise cannot be expressed through words, as if, somehow, it has bypassed language as a symbolic system. It leaves a void, the narrative voice clarifies, "where the noise had only just been" (128). The emergence of this void for which there is no signifier breaks down semantic domains (Thompson 2017, 44). The characters struggle to make up for this slow-release linguistic and narrative collapse. They first try to look for some sense of causality and narrativity to explain what is happening, such as thunder on a cloudless day; a bomb; a missile; a plane; a sonic boom; a nuclear accident; a missile. What becomes clear, however, is that, as Amanda intuits, the noise can never be "satisfactorily explained. It was past logic, or explanation, at least" (2020,

129). When a few pages later the omniscient narrator reveals what the characters do not know, that “the planes dispatched from Rome, New York, usually flew north [...]. But they were off to intercept something that approached the nation’s eastern flank. The circumference of the noise they created was about fifty miles—a rend in heaven right over their little house” (134), the explanation only adds more layers of uncertainty and mystery. The visual image of this “rend” or split in the heavens deepens the sense of a hole or void in language and signification.

As an epicenter of meaning, a ground zero of sorts, the fracture reverberates back to Clay’s assessment of the woman speaking Spanish and what he thought of as the downfall of a powerful civilization. Just as the woman’s civilization invented astronomy, for example, Clay’s people invented the internet, a technological breakthrough that becomes irrelevant in the new “normal” the characters are desperately struggling to assess. The out-of-placeness and vulnerability he assigned to the woman no longer seems like an isolated incident or an exception from Clay’s point of view. Like externality, alterity is no longer paired up with a woman stranded by the side of the road, nor is it automatically associated with an alleged noisy Other. Rather, the emergence of this void transforms the exception into the rule. There is no boundary separating what is intelligible from what is not, the outside from the inside, language from noise. As paradoxical as it sounds, Serres suggests, “the host starts to imitate the guest” (2007, 206) and Clay becomes closer to the character of the woman. As opposed to the drawing of clear-cut antinomies between sound and noise, English and Spanish, host and guest, the novel takes the characters to the unexpected realm of mixtures.

5. ENGLISH AS NOISE: THE SELF AND NOISE

The Devil or the Good Lord? Exclusion, inclusion? Thesis or antithesis? The answer is a spectrum, a band, a continuum. We will no longer answer with a simple yes or no to such questions of sides. Inside or outside? Between yes and no, between zero and one, an infinite number of values appear, and thus an infinite number of answers. Mathematicians call this new rigor ‘fuzzy’: fuzzy subsets, fuzzy topology.

Michel Serres, *The Parasite*

The stranded woman becomes the uninvited guest, the parasite, the static whose presence ripples through the novel. When Amanda, GH and Ruth, anxiously ask Clay if he saw anyone out there when he returns to the house, Clay repeatedly denies seeing anyone on his journey. Even if he is still wondering whether she found anyone to help her and what she did when she heard the noise, he tells himself that she does not matter. The more she is denied, however, the more present she becomes. The harder he tries to keep her out and remain impermeable to her vulnerability, the more he realizes that her noise, exteriority and disposability are already part of his reality. This realization becomes especially acute when Archie, the couple’s son, becomes ill and

Rose, the daughter, disappears. The whole family is desperate to find help. GH drives father and son to the nearest hospital. During the ride Clay admits to GH that he saw a woman standing on the side of the road. The first feature he points out is that she was dressed as a maid. Then he explains the impossibility of communicating with her: "She was speaking in Spanish, and I don't know what she was saying, and I would have used Google Translate but I couldn't and then I just—" (215). The long dash, what he cannot articulate in front of Archie, stands for his abandoning of the woman, a woman who, GH mentions, could have been Rosa, their maid. Rosa, a name initially distant in language and class, stands in direct symmetry with Rose, Clay and Amanda's daughter, who has vanished from the house. The contrast between the woman's noise and Clay's sound no longer matters, for both have come under the sway of the big noise, the feeling of horror (140), and the lack of refuge in its aftermath. Similarly, for Amanda the house "didn't feel as safe anymore, it didn't feel the same, nothing did" (140). They are all part of the outside. The Spanish-speaking woman was abandoned; they are abandoned: "I left her. She needed help. We need help" (215). Clay's words reveal the recognition of a shared vulnerability and relationality.

Inexplicably, on their way to the hospital GH decides to stop by the home of Danny, his contractor. In GH's mind Danny is a local and will know what to do. The conversation mirrors Clay's encounter with the woman. Even if this time the conversation between the three speakers transpires in English, words seem to be deprived of their meaning. There is no linguistic boundary between Spanish and English, noise and sound, yet the exchange illustrates the break in language and signification the noise has brought about. Danny greets the callers with a formulaic "What can I do for you" (227) that only means that he is not interested in doing anything for them. Although Clay gets out of the car and accompanies GH, he becomes as voiceless as the Spanish-speaking woman. Even if he manages to interject short phrases that gradually convey his desperate situation, from the formal and formulaic "I'm Clay" (227) and "My family is renting George's house" (226), to the more emotionally invested "My son is sick" (228) and "[W]e are going to the hospital" (229), his utterances cannot express the full range of his worries and expectations (whether this man would walk through the woods and find Rose; whether he would have medicine for Archie; whether he would welcome them into his big house). This emotional realm is unmapped by these short utterances that seem to have no communicational index and simply go unnoticed by either GH or Danny, as if they were not listening. In fact, Clay cannot understand how little Danny is interested (228). He is not aware of the fact that, like noise, he now occupies a subordinate position and embodies a lack of significance because he is seen as disorder. He is now undesired, unwanted, and unorganized: the new embodiment of noise. Danny seems as impermeable to Clay's interpellation as he himself was to the woman's noise. Clay cannot understand that he is now the parasitic presence, the excluded one in the conversation. Just like the woman was unable to explain what was happening and her words in English were misunderstood by Clay, now Clay finds himself unable to articulate in English, or in any other language, what is happening to them:

“Clay didn’t know how to explain that something had knocked the teeth from Archie’s sixteen-year-old mouth. It made no sense” (228). English cannot express the full range of his experience, as if suddenly it was not his own language. For both Danny and GH, Clay is now the parasite and simply makes noise. As such, following Thompson, he is immediately transformed into someone worthless, incomprehensible, or extraneous. The novel thus evolves from the characterization of foreigners as noise to the characterization of nationals as noise, in a constant disruption of roles that allows for new relations to emerge. In the face of the new noisy parasite, and just as Clay did, Danny is saying there is no help. He simply wants these men off his property. Against this apparent invasion from the outside, Danny is reacting like Amanda did at the beginning of the novel, preparing for violence. He is just locking the doors and getting his gun out. His need to draw the line between his property and those who need help recalls Clay’s need to roll up the car window and drive away when he is interpellated by the Spanish-speaking woman.

6. CONCLUSION: THE CYCLE OF NOISE

Danny’s seeking refuge against the exteriority, confusion and strangeness of the outside in the protection of the inside, however, is doomed to fail. What he does not know is that a similar ailment has affected his wife, Karen. Her teeth, like Archie’s, are also loose, and will soon fall out (228). This is the omniscient narrator’s hint at a prospective encounter, the beginning of another cycle of shared vulnerability, when Danny will have to explain the inexplicable, and experience a similar breakdown in communication as if, once again, English is not his own language. He will then turn into the source of noise and will be labeled accordingly. English, like Spanish before, will no longer create a regime of belonging *vs* unbelonging. Thus the novel goes against the established modes of order making, and moves from the traditional view of the Other as the cause of noise to the self as noise maker. The “un-ness” and subordinate position traditionally attributed to noise re-shifts and is applied to the self.

Alam situates the errantry of noise and its intrinsic changing and migrational nature at the center of the novel in order to carry out a powerful repositioning without the ideological comforts of narrative closure. If noise, interference and static have been traditionally chased out of the conversation, as the novel initially illustrates, the question Alam posits is what to expect when noise is the message and cannot be excluded; what happens when the subjective perception of noise is set loose, and it is up to another listener to consider one’s words as mere noise?; what happens when the possession of your language and the language of the land does not mean you are home? The world of fixed roles crumbles in Alam’s novel and is replaced by an endless becoming where everything is in a state of transition. Noise dismantles previous categories and inherent hierarchies, such as self *vs* Other, inside *vs* outside, belonging *vs* non- belonging, and puts them in motion: the self becomes the Other and sound becomes noise in a new cycle of communication. Noise, the novel suggests, appears as an unstoppable

and transformative force that spreads vulnerability and relationality, as well as new movements and displacements. Noise, to return to Derrida in *Monolingualism of the Other*, disrupts and intersects with the sense of possessing a language that characters such as Clay and Danny may feel. Theirs is no longer an exclusive possession. They can never be at home in a language that seems to have lost its traditional moorings. Such is the intersection of noise studies, language, race and Otherness that Alam opens up for future research; such is the terrain of our future (and current) sense of dread.²

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