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## Of Cannonades and Battle Cries: Aurality, The Battle of The Alamo, and Memory

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Of Cannonades and Battle Cries: Aurality, The Battle of The Alamo, and Memory

by

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Bachelor of Arts  
Baylor University, 2015

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## DEDICATION

To my parents, Joe and Patricia Herbelin, and my little sister Elise, who have patiently indulged and cultivated my love for history and accompanied me on countless long visits to the Alamo.

## ABSTRACT

This thesis takes a sensory-historical approach to the 1836 Siege and Battle of the Alamo, its inscription into history and its propagation as a touchstone of Texas' memory and identity. My focus is on the auditory, an especially important sensory experience to consider. Among the many auditory tactics deployed during the siege, the storming itself took place in the pre-dawn darkness, and many of the survivors' accounts were from women and children among the garrison, who were sequestered away from the visual experience of the battle. Flooding from the accounts of survivors into the popular imagination of Texans, the sounds of battle became powerful auditory motifs meant to provoke emotions including pride, anger, and nostalgia, as well as inscribing a sense of Texas' national identity.

## PREFACE

War is a dramatic and often overwhelming sensory experience, and the Texas Revolution was no exception. The conflict's most widely-known battle, the thirteen day siege and battle of the Alamo in February and March of 1836, had a cultural and political significance that far outweighed its immediate strategic consequences. Histories, poetry, songs, and other commemorative literature about the Alamo have proliferated since 1836, providing a rich window into how contemporaries and subsequent generations described the sensory nature of the battle. has been critically important to the formation of Texas identity. Paul Andrew Hutton characterizes the Alamo as Texas' "creation myth," elevating the defenders to heroic status and casting their Mexican enemy as the villains. Any symbol so weighted with meaning invites questions of how it became such a potent icon, the values it represents, and how it reflects on the society that created it.<sup>1</sup> These provide an ideal opportunity for a much needed examination of the aural experience of war,<sup>2</sup> and from there to trace how that aural experience contributed to Alamo memory and mythmaking.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Andrew Hutton, "The Alamo as Icon," in Joseph G. Dawson III, ed., *The Texas Military Experience: From the Texas Revolution through World War II* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1995), 14-15.

<sup>2</sup> Mark M. Smith, *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 4-8.

Alamo memory, as my study addresses it, encompasses both so-called “popular” memory and some of the earliest Alamo historiography, from the 1830s roughly up to the 1920s. I choose this scope in part because witnesses of the battle were being interviewed, reinterviewed, and published up through the early twentieth century. Especially since accounts were percolating into print over such a long stretch of time, Alamo memory has very much informed by historiography and vice versa.

That said, popular histories comprise the vast majority of secondary literature on the Alamo. The shortage of scholarship on the Alamo of myth and memory is far less severe, but treatments of the Alamo’s filmography and role in culture wars since the mid-twentieth century have occupied the attention of historians to a much greater extent than earlier periods, (although Hutton does note the significance of the nineteenth century commemorative literature identifying the Alamo defenders with the Spartans at Thermopylae.)<sup>3</sup> In any case, no serious analysis has been focused on the role of the senses in either the 1836 battle or its role as an object of memory.

Although the experience of the siege and battle were necessarily involved all senses, there are advantages to honing in on hearing. Re-reading existing primary accounts reveals the importance of sound as a way in which the combatants harassed their respective enemies, upheld their own morale, and communicated among themselves, civilian populations, and even settlements miles away from San Antonio. Aurality held even greater importance for the women and children inside the fort, who would produce a majority of the extant firsthand accounts about the defenders’ experience of the siege and

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<sup>3</sup> Hutton, “The Alamo as Icon,” 16-17.

battle. Most, including Susanna Dickinson and the Esparza family, were quartered in a small room of the church. Being in-laws of Colonel James Bowie and under his special protection, Juana Navarro Alsbury, her infant son, and her sister Gertrudis Navarro had been quartered separately in a room on the west wall.<sup>4</sup> In both their cases, these noncombatants were sequestered away from visually witnessing the battle. The Mexican Army made its final surprise assault in the predawn darkness, rendering aural even more critical in the experience of the battle. Afterwards, they would correlate their aural experiences with what they saw of the aftermath as they stepped outside their quarters and what they learned from others. Aural is therefore key to understanding the production of historical knowledge and evaluating what we can and cannot learn from the sources available.

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<sup>4</sup> Randy Roberts and James S. Olson, *A Line in the Sand: The Alamo in Blood and Memory* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 166-67; Timothy M. Matovina, *The Alamo Remembered: Tejano Accounts and Perspectives* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 45.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication .....	iii
Abstract .....	iv
Preface .....	v
Chapter 1: Sound as Strategy and Experience .....	1
Chapter 2: Aurality and Alamo Memory .....	12
Bibliography .....	24

## CHAPTER 1

### SOUND AS STRATEGY AND EXPERIENCE

Whether they thought about it in such a manner, both armies utilized tactics of sonic warfare in their campaigns. The Mexican Army used a sensory strategy to impress, pacify, or terrify those they encountered. In Goliad, a majority Tejano town about ninety miles to the southeast of San Antonio, Philip Dimmitt blamed the population's lack of enthusiasm for the Texan cause in part on the dramatic effects of the short occupation of General Cos and his army in 1835. "I have done, and have said, everything which I could do, or say, to pacify and inspire them with confidence—But they had seen the brilliant equipment of Cos, his sword, and retinue; and they had listened to his flattering and captivating speeches; they had attended his parties, and tasted his wine: But we have made no such display...."<sup>5</sup> Cos went on to occupy San Antonio in 1835. He was besieged by Texan forces in October of 1835 and eventually driven out after the Battle of Bexar early that December. Very few accounts survive of what San Antonio was like during that occupation. Music, parties, dances, and speeches probably took place there as well, just as they would under subsequent Texan occupation.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Dimmitt to Austin, Goliad, October 25, 1835, *Austin Papers*, Vol. 3, p. 208. Although Dimmitt makes it sound like Cos' sensory strategy was entirely to blame for the locals' aloofness, the misconduct of the Texian garrison certainly played a part in keeping them away.

<sup>6</sup> "An Incident in the Siege of San Antonio," *Texian Advocate*, February 20, 1850, in Zaboly, 88. See also the excerpt from Antonio Menchaca's *Memoirs in Matovina*, 117-19 for an instance of the Texan command also throwing parties.

In early January of 1836, an ill-fated expedition to Matamoros, Tamaulipas had drained most of the manpower that had remained after Cos' surrender and occupation. Lt. Col. James C. Neill remained in command at Bexar with a small garrison of only 100 men.<sup>7</sup> The soundscape of 1830s San Antonio is difficult to establish, but some accounts provide hints of the sounds in living memory and the San Antonio's population had reached its peak in before the Gutierrez-Magee Expedition in 1812-13. One writer had described the city as a "magnificent city of the wilderness, with all the hum, the bustling, and the brisk business avocations pertaining to the inhabitants of such."<sup>8</sup> The brutal occupations of San Antonio by both rebel and royalist armies and the decisive battle of Medina had taken its toll on the town's population and presumably on the hum it once had. The upheaval of the 1810s was still well within living memory for many Bexareños; 1835 was not the first time they had heard the sound of battle or the noise of an occupying army, but those were far from the sounds of everyday life in Bexar.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast to Cos' 1835 occupations, there was little impulse to court the favor of the Tejano residents who remained in San Antonio in 1836, but the strategies used by the Mexican Army to impress their presence on the population of San Antonio still appealed strongly to the senses. Aurality in particular played an important role in announcing and

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<sup>7</sup> Stephen L. Hardin, *Texian Iliad: A Military History of the Texas Revolution, 1835-1836* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994.), 107.

<sup>8</sup> Gary S. Zaboly, *An Altar for Their Sons: The Alamo and the Texas Revolution in Contemporary Newspaper Accounts* (Buffalo Gap, Texas: State House Press, 2011), location 362 (Kindle Edition)

<sup>9</sup> Bruce R. Smith, "The Soundscapes of Early Modern England," in Mark Smith, *Hearing History: A Reader* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 85-86. Before automobiles and electrification, cannon-fire, ringing bells, and thunder were the loudest sounds an early modern listener would hear; against a much more dramatically quiet backdrop—one without the "masking" noises of automobile traffic or A/C.

reiterating the presence and power of the Mexican army both to the Bexareños and the besieged Texans. Santa Anna definitively took control of the soundscape of San Antonio when his army marched into town.

Young Juan Díaz, whose father was the custodian of the San Fernando Cathedral, was alerted to the arrival of the Mexican Army by “the sound of martial music” while he was playing with his friends and sisters. He watched the occupation of the town from the cathedral tower. He remembered that the band led the way, “playing the liveliest airs.” Visuality nicely complementing aurality, the color guard and a religious image accompanied the band, which stopped on the Main Plaza where it was stationed for the rest of the siege.<sup>10</sup> Some of the symbolism was lost on the boy, who thought the image resembled an alligator, but the sounds were nevertheless clearly understandable to a child.

Issued from a central place in town, and within full view of the Alamo, Santa Anna had a gun salute fired—an unequivocal statement of his control of the town. The family of Tejano volunteer Gregorio Esparza followed him into the Alamo, and his son Enrique remembered, “There was a bridge over the river about where Commerce Street crosses it and just as we got to it we could hear Santa Anna’s drums beating on Milam Square; and just as we were crossing the ditch going into the fort Santa Anna fired his

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<sup>10</sup> “As a Boy, Juan Díaz, Venerable San Antonian Witnessed the Attack on the Alamo,” *San Antonio Light*, September 1, 1907, in Matovina, 93. See also Díaz’ account via Creed Taylor in James T. DeShields, *Tall Men with Long Rifles* (1935. San Antonio: Naylor Company, 1971), 178-79. It is especially clear in this account that Díaz perceives the band to be leading, and the color guard is accompanying it—not the other way around.

salute on Milam Square.”<sup>11</sup> They had accomplished their flight from the town just as Santa Anna loudly declared his possession of it. Juan Diaz, having climbed down from his perch on the San Fernando Cathedral, reported being “awe-struck” at the sound of these first rounds of artillery.<sup>12</sup> Santa Anna used his salvos and martial music as “totalizing sounds,” described by historian Bruce Smith as “an experience of sounds that possessed an acoustic profile broad enough and high enough to stretch to the very horizon of hearing.” His early modern English examples, the installations of new Lord Mayors of London and royal entries of the city. The means remained the same—processions through the city with music; artillery salutes being the most notable. There is important difference in intention. Totalizing sounds served royal authority as much as they did Santa Anna’s. However, Mexican occupation of 1836 was not necessarily meant to “hear the city whole” or give it “a unified voice” under the auspices of a mayor or monarch.<sup>13</sup> The sounds of February 23<sup>rd</sup> might better be characterized as means of making Bexar hear the army whole, and give a unified voice to Mexican national sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The bulk of the Mexican aural strategy, however, was directed towards wearing down and harassing the Alamo garrison. Cannonading, the march of “Deguello,” and sometimes elaborate feigned attacks all preyed upon their enemy’s ears. On the second

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<sup>11</sup> “The Story of Enrique Esparza,” *San Antonio Express*, November 22, 1902, in Timothy M. Matovina, *The Alamo Remembered: Tejano Accounts and Perspectives* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 68.

<sup>12</sup> “As a Boy, Juan Díaz, Venerable San Antonian Witnessed the Attack on the Alamo,” *San Antonio Light*, September 1, 1907, in Matovina, 93. See also Díaz’ account via Creed Taylor in DeShields, 178-79. This would refer to either the shots fired in response to Travis’ cannon shot in response to the demand for unconditional surrender, or Santa Anna’s gun salute on the Main Plaza.

<sup>13</sup> Bruce Smith, “Soundscapes of Early Modern England,” 95-96.

day of the siege, Colonel Almonte wrote in his diary, “At evening the music struck up, and went to entertain the enemy with *it* and some *grenades*.”<sup>14</sup> Almonte’s uncharacteristically sarcastic choice of words reveals an aspect of performance. Dr. Joseph Barnard’s account of the Battle of Coleto later that March reflects a similar characterization. Spending the night pinned down on the battlefield, Col. James Fannin’s men heard the Mexican patrol’s “incessant music with their bugles to regale us.”<sup>15</sup> The performance communicated an ominous meaning. The cavalry march of “Deguello,” meant that no quarter would be given to the besieged.<sup>16</sup> The Mexican band served the purpose of reiterating the army’s presence upon the Alamo defenders, as it had done with the residents of Bexar.

Rafael Soldana, interviewed by Creed Taylor in the 1840s, gave the most detailed description of the auditory feints used against the Alamo defenders. As a captain in the Tampico Battalion—a company level officer—he was likely employed in directing some of the more minor of the activities he described:

“One of the measures employed was that of constant alarms during the hours of the night. At intervals, when silence reigned over the Alamo and all was still in camp, the artillery would open, and a great shout would be raised by the besieging forces and this uproar, supplemented by the volleys of musketry, was intended to make the

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<sup>14</sup> Diary of Juan Almonte, February 24, 1836, in Bill Groneman, *Eyewitness to the Alamo*, Rev. ed. (Plano: Republic of Texas Press, 2001), 32.

<sup>15</sup> Journal of Joseph Barnard, in Clarence Wharton, *Remember Goliad* (Glorieta, NM: Rio Grande Press, 1968), 19-20.

<sup>16</sup> Reuben M. Potter, “The Fall of the Alamo,” *Magazine of American History* 2.1 (January 1878), 11.

impression that a night assault had been planned, and also to make it appear to the beleaguered that their expected reinforcements, while trying to make their way into the Alamo, had become engaged with the enemy and were being destroyed. These continued—almost hourly—alarms throughout the night were supposed to keep every American in position ready to repel the attack, thus through loss of sleep and increasing anxiety unfitting him for the final struggle.”<sup>17</sup>

This strategy struck at both the Alamo defenders’ physical and mental well-being, and Soldana’s account showed that the Mexican army consciously manipulated sound to tell stories intended to sap the garrison of their hope for reinforcements. Only on the twelfth and final night of the siege did the Mexican army allow the Alamo garrison a full night of silence while organizing for their final pre-dawn assault. Their strategy hinged on silence and invisibility.<sup>18</sup>

The Alamo garrison in turn utilized aural strategies for similar, if primarily defensive reasons. The Mexican strategy had succeeded in exacting an exhausting vigilance from the defenders. Sentries not only watched but listened, and the signal from the pickets would have been auditory.<sup>19</sup> The nerves of the defenders proved very strained when a reinforcement of 32 men managed to sneak in through Mexican lines in the dark of the night of March 1 only to be greeted with a shot from a sentry that wounded one of

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<sup>17</sup> DeShields, 183.

<sup>18</sup> Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, 1837, in Groneman, 53-54; Unidentified Mexican Army Sources in General Vicente Filisola’s *Memorias*, 1848, in Groneman, 66.

<sup>19</sup> “Fall of San Antonio and Its One Hundred and Eighty Seven Gallant Defenders,” *Memphis Enquirer*, April 12, 1836, in Zaboly, 218.

the men. (Subsequently hearing curses uttered in English proved the identity of the reinforcements.)<sup>20</sup>

The garrison was not completely defenseless against the aural struggle, however. Enrique Esparza recalled that his father's company sallied out on the first night of the siege and managed to take a Mexican soldier prisoner. This capture provided the garrison with critical aural intelligence—he could interpret the Mexican bugle calls, and thus many of the army's movements.<sup>21</sup> The defenders also made music and noises of their own to shore up their morale. Susanna Dickinson remembered David Crockett playing “his favorite tunes” on the fiddle a number of times.<sup>22</sup> Upon hearing from a messenger that reinforcements were on their way, the Texans celebrated with flute and drum music.<sup>23</sup> The garrison celebrated the reinforcements from Gonzales with music as well. Crockett played his fiddle and a Scottish defender named John McGregor played bagpipes alongside.<sup>24</sup> Cursing, shouting, and cheering also helped Texans aurally reinforce their morale, blow off steam, and respond directly to their besiegers. Rafael Soldana remembered that whenever Mexican soldiers would shout at the defenders, they would shout back “in the liveliest terms.” In particular, a man he termed “Kwockey,” (easily identifiable as Crockett), “had a strong, resonant voice and often railed at us” in a tone that was obviously “defiant” but in English that Soldana and his men did not

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<sup>20</sup> Randy Roberts and James S. Olson, *A Line in the Sand: The Alamo in Blood and Memory* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 140.

<sup>21</sup> Esparza, 1902, in Matovina, 69; Esparza, 1936, in Groneman, 191.

<sup>22</sup> Susanna Hannig (Dickinson), 1875, in Groneman, 88.

<sup>23</sup> Esparza, 1902, in Matovina, 70.

<sup>24</sup> Hardin, 133-34.



understand.<sup>25</sup> Within the walls of the church, Enrique Esparza remembered the gunners in the Alamo cheering in response to audible “jeers” from the Mexican troops.<sup>26</sup>

Aurality linked the Alamo garrison to the possibility of help from the world outside of San Antonio. Although powder in the Alamo was scarce, Travis had a signal shot fired from the fort’s 18 pound pivot gun, perhaps as often as three times daily. The 18 pounder was the largest piece of ordinance on either side, and the one that could be heard the farthest.<sup>27</sup> There was apparently a smaller signal gun that Travis fired at 15 minute intervals. Juan Seguin, captain of a Tejano contingent in the Alamo garrison, had left as a courier during the siege. On March 6, he led a company and a smattering of volunteers in a relief attempt. To their dismay, they “arrived at the Cibolo and, not hearing the signal gun which was to be discharged every fifteen minutes as long as the place held out, we retraced our steps to convey to the General-in-Chief the sad tidings.”<sup>28</sup> The relief party’s immediate conclusion that the Alamo had fallen testified to the importance of the signal guns as means of communication.

The defenders’ interpretations of what they heard may have helped limit the effectiveness of the Mexican aural strategy on the defenders’ spirits. The cannonade may have seemed constant, but the damage done to the walls had been reparable, and it had killed no one in the sprawling compound. Travis attributed the incongruity between the

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<sup>25</sup> DeShields, 183-84.

<sup>26</sup> Esparza, 1907, in Matovina, 80.

<sup>27</sup> Zaboly, loc. 3389-3396 (Kindle Edition)

<sup>28</sup> Juan N. Seguin, *Personal Memoirs of John N. Seguin*, 1858, in Matovina, 41-42.

constant barrage and the lack of casualties as evidence of providential blessing.<sup>29</sup> There might be sudden noises of feigned attack in the night and taunting music from their enemy, but confidence in divine protection provided a strong corrective for despair.<sup>30</sup>

Depressing an enemy's spirits while raising those of one's own side were often two sides of the same coin. On March 3<sup>rd</sup>, Mexican army rang bells to celebrate the news that a separate wing of the army under General Urrea had defeated a Texan force at San Patricio. In addition, three more of Santa Anna's battalions arrived in San Antonio to the sound of music.<sup>31</sup> Such sounds were sure to uplift Mexican morale, but it conveyed an ominous message to the defenders that the noose around them was tightening. Enrique Esparza did not need to see the columns of men entering the town to know what was happening. He learned of the reinforcements by the "music in the Mexican camp," which the captured Mexican soldier interpreted.<sup>32</sup> Lt. Col. Travis attributed still more significance to the sounds. Although Santa Anna had been in Bexar since the first day of the siege, Travis had dismissed reports to that effect as rumor. The sounds of music and celebration on the third were enough to impress him otherwise. "From the rejoicing we

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<sup>29</sup> William Barret Travis, February 24, 1836, in Groneman, 4-5; Travis to Houston, February 25, 1836, in Groneman, 7-8; Travis to Convention, March 3, 1836, in Groneman, 11-12; Travis to unidentified friend, March 3, 1836, in Groneman, 13.

<sup>30</sup> Potter, 1878, 9-10.

<sup>31</sup> Almonte, Journal entry of Thursday March 3<sup>rd</sup>, in Groneman, 32.

<sup>32</sup> Esparza, 1902, in Matovina, 70. Esparza does not date this event specifically on the third, but he does place it after the short armistice. It is more likely than not that he was describing the sound of these battalions arriving.

hear,” Travis reported, he thought it “more than probable” that Santa Anna himself had arrived in San Antonio with the reinforcements.<sup>33</sup>

Another instance of the dual purpose of sonic warfare was recalled by Lt. Col. de la Peña. The sounding of the call to charge inspired the Mexican ranks, but it was also meant to “make others tremble.”<sup>34</sup> His description of the assault, however, makes it clear that the intended effects did not always work so simply. Bugle calls were totalizing sounds that compelled a community of arms into action, but the emboldening, communal effects could not completely erase the association with danger and death—at least not at first. De la Peña wrote, “a bugle call to attention was the agreed upon signal and we soon heard that terrible bugle call of death, which stirred our hearts, altered our expressions, and aroused us all suddenly from our painful meditations...A trumpeter of sappers (José María González) was the one who inspired us to scorn life and welcome death. Seconds later the horror of this sound fled from among us, honor and glory replacing it.”<sup>35</sup>

In illustrating how the same sounds could be harnessed to different ends, de la Peña’s description of the bugle’s psychological effects raises questions about how sound is interpreted and remembered by different people in different times. He wrote this knowing the outcome of the battle, having his own political agenda, and having been shaped by the understanding of warfare in his time and place. De la Peña, the battle’s survivors, and the wide array of other people who shaped the Alamo of myth and

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<sup>33</sup> Travis to Convention, March 3, 1836, in Groneman, 11.

<sup>34</sup> José Enrique de la Peña, *With Santa Anna in Texas: A Personal Narrative of the Revolution*, trans. and ed. Carmen Perry (College Station: TAMU Press, 1975), 47.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

memory all imbued sound with value.<sup>36</sup> This illustrates, of course, that the senses are historical, subject to influence by particular historical contexts. Moreover, it reveals the rhetorical power of the senses in the construction of memory: the subject I delve more fully into in the following pages.

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<sup>36</sup> Mark M. Smith, *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 5.

## CHAPTER 2

### AURALITY AND ALAMO MEMORY

Evocative, value-laden aural imagery and repeated aural motifs have formed an integral part of the memory of the Alamo. This mythic Alamo—involving everything from art, music, film and 20<sup>th</sup> century pop culture, to incendiary debates over how Crockett died—has been adeptly studied by professional and lay historians, preservationists, and anthropologists.<sup>37</sup> These studies have not dealt with the role of the senses in constructing memory, although sensory perception is necessarily prerequisite. Thus the importance of contextualizing the senses and recognizing the role of past sensory regimes as a part of the study of memory. Historicized senses first influenced how people perceived the events they lived through; then which sensory details were highlighted and which were all but ignored. Furthermore, the ways in which sounds are remembered are markedly colored by personal and political circumstance. The auditory descriptions of the siege and battle of the Alamo by both survivors and mythmakers deserve attention in this way.

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<sup>37</sup> See Adina De Zavala and Richard R. Flores, *History and Legends of the Alamo and Other Missions in and around San Antonio* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1996); Randy Roberts and James S. Olson, *A Line in the Sand: The Alamo in Blood and Memory* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001); James Crisp, *Sleuthing the Alamo: Davy Crockett's Last Stand and Other Mysteries of the Texas Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Frank Thompson, *The Alamo: A Cultural History* (Dallas: Taylor Publishing Co., 2001); Holly Beachley Brear, *Inherit the Alamo: Myth and Ritual at an American Shrine* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995); Richard Flores, *Remembering the Alamo: Memory, Modernity, and the Master Symbol* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

One of the most immediate ways in which aurality imprinted the Alamo into memory was with tried and true sounds of commemoration. In the first instance, Santa Anna addressed a speech to his men inside the Alamo in the immediate aftermath of the battle. This incident also reveals the potential for multivalence as sounds made their way into the participants' memory. Joe, de la Peña, and Sánchez Navarro all remembered the speech and the troops' reaction, but each had a different understanding of the way it sounded. Joe's account is the simplest, reflecting none of the internal politics of the Mexican army present in the other men's remembrances. With his men in a hollow formation, "Santa Anna addressed them in a very animated manner. They responded to it with loud vivas."<sup>38</sup> For Joe, the Mexican Army sounded as one monolithic whole; their enthusiastic support for Santa Anna evidenced by the volume of their cheers.

This enthusiasm was, however, characteristic of Lt. Col. José Juan Sánchez Navarro. Following his glowing account of the battle, Sánchez Navarro described Santa Anna's speech as "beautiful," and noting that he spoke "within view of the enemy's corpses," a symbolic expansion of the audience.<sup>39</sup> Compared to both of the previous accounts, Santa Anna's bitter critic Lt. Col. de la Peña registered the sounds in a more dismal manner. Santa Anna praised his soldiers, but de la Peña heard no Napoleonic "magic" in his words. On the spur of the moment, "seized by one of those impulses triggered by enthusiasm or one formed to avoid reflection," he helped break the troops' initial silence, cheering the Republic and the bravery of the Aldama Battalion chasseurs.

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<sup>38</sup> "Texas," *Frankfort Commonwealth*, May 25, 1836, in Zaboly, loc. 5032. (Kindle Edition)

<sup>39</sup> *El Mosquito Mexicano*, April 5, 1836, in Zaboly, loc. 5618 (Kindle Edition)

He claimed that although the cheers caught on, “the *vivas* were seconded icily.”<sup>40</sup> De la Peña’s disillusionment and Sánchez Navarro’s euphoria had colored how they remembered the sounds of the Alamo, while Joe, without knowledge of the army’s internal dynamics, could not pick up on nuances in the men’s cheers or the gravitas in Santa Anna’s voice. That the aural descriptions of this speech differ so markedly shows that the intended meaning of aural commemoration can still be belied by individual experience.

When the news of the victory at the Alamo reached Mexico City, and the captured flag of the New Orleans Greys was presented to the Mexican Congress, “solemnizing such fortunate news was done with a salvo of artillery and ringing of bells.” Minister of War Tornel then read an account of the battle to Congress and a packed crowd of eager listeners.<sup>41</sup> Speaking of San Antonio, Sánchez Navarro reported that the victory “has been solemnized by this town with the greatest enthusiasm.”<sup>42</sup> Especially in a Catholic context, solemnization of events and honoring of individuals with bells was common practice; the ringing of church bells would have invoked the whole of Mexico City or San Antonio in the commemoration.<sup>43</sup> One might wonder how well Sánchez Navarro could truly judge the “enthusiasm” of Bexareños by the sound of their solemnizations.

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<sup>40</sup> De la Peña, 52-53.

<sup>41</sup> *Diario del Gobierno*, March 21, 1836, in Zaboly, 201.

<sup>42</sup> *El Mosquito Mexicano*, April 5, 1836, in Zaboly, loc. 5618 (Kindle Edition)

<sup>43</sup> Alain Corbin, “Identity, Bells, and the Nineteenth-Century French Village,” in Smith, *Hearing History*, 184-200.

Nevertheless, given his own enthusiasm, it is not surprising that he would hear the commemoration as evidence of similar feelings.

Texans likewise knew the value of aural commemoration. Juan Seguin had been sent as a courier from the besieged Alamo. After the victory at San Jacinto, Seguin returned to San Antonio, gathered the ashes of his fellow Alamo defenders, and held a burial service in which totalizing sounds held prominent meaning. He and his men processed through San Antonio, fired three volleys of musketry at each place where the ashes of a funeral pyre were collected. Seguin made a speech in Spanish, then Major Thomas Western spoke in English, and his men fired another three volleys of musketry over the grave with a precision that Seguin found impressive. He regretted, however, that he lacked enough powder to fire half-hour guns.<sup>44</sup> The translation of his speech that appeared in the *Telegraph and Texas Register* confirmed the community-defining aspect of totalizing sounds, in this case affirming the brotherhood of the defenders found in separate piles of ash with the living soldiers of Texas. Seguin described to his men “the spirit of liberty” declaring to them that “These are your brothers, Travis, Bowie, Crockett, and others whose valor places them in the rank of my heroes.”<sup>45</sup>

As the Alamo became memorialized in prose, poetry, and song, auditory motifs developed, and examining some of the most common ones promises insights into the meanings they attached to hearing, war, and Texas identity. In the first place, early mythologizers frequently invoked noises of the battle of the Alamo itself. Far from trying to reconstruct anything like a soundscape of the battle, early writers were selective

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<sup>44</sup> Juan N. Seguin to Albert Sidney Johnston, March 13, 1837, in Matovina, 19-20.

<sup>45</sup> *Columbia Telegraph and Texas Register*, April 4, 1837, in Matovina, 20-21.



in choosing their aural motifs. Their decisions about which sounds they would use and which they would pass over were influenced by historiographical priorities, the imperatives of building Texan national identity, and a stylized vocabulary surrounding the experience of war.

The political and historiographical priorities that shaped the interpretation of survivor accounts were bound up in assumptions about gender, race, and visibility. Creed Taylor, a veteran of the battle of San Jacinto, had interviewed several Mexican prisoners about the battle, and considered their testimony more valuable than even that of Susanna Dickinson or other noncombatants. The horrific scenes she encountered in the aftermath (although in his mind not sufficient to tell us about the progress of the battle), noise of battle coming from all directions, and her isolation in a small room of the church, “must have been enough to dethrone the poor woman’s reason at that hour,” leading Taylor to conclude that “she knew but little of what was going on in and around the old fortress.” Although he later expands on her testimony, he found its worth mostly in its emotional quality rather than its narrative content. Seeing was believing for Taylor, and what was seen of the battle he privileged in his telling.<sup>46</sup> It might be tempting to discount his assessment as singular if it were not for observing that Reuben Potter, the first bona fide Alamo historian, demonstrated a similar attitude towards noncombatant accounts. Part of this bias simply comes from his research objectives: Potter was interested, not in a

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<sup>46</sup> DeShields, 179; 187-89. That a number of Hispanic women and children had survived the battle was not mentioned in most early histories; Juana Alsbury’s is the only such reliable account extant.

sweeping account of the experience of the battle, but in reconstructing its military aspect, privileging the decisions of commanders and combat itself.<sup>47</sup>

Sound was still important in communicating the pathos of the battle and the valor of the defenders. (Dickinson’s account was most useful to early historians in this way.) Reuben Potter himself wrote one of the most popular pieces of Alamo poetry in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Set to the recognizably and unapologetically nationalistic tune of the Marseilles Hymn, his “Hymn of the Alamo” powerfully evoked the noise of battle.

“Rise, man the wall, our clarion’s blast  
Now sounds it final reveille;  
This dawning morn must be the last  
Our fated band shall ever see.  
To life but not to hope, farewell—  
Yon trumpet’s clang and cannon’s peal,  
And storming shout, and clash of steel,  
Are ours, but not our country’s knell:  
Welcome the Spartan’s death—  
‘Tis no despairing strife.  
We fall, we die, but our expiring breath  
Is freedom’s breath of life.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Reuben Potter, “Incidents of the Texian War: Attack and Defense of the Alamo,” *The Madisonian*, December 8, 1840, in Zaboly, loc. 6154-6223 (Kindle Edition); Potter, 1878, 1-2. John Henry Brown’s standard 1892 *The History of Texas from 1685 to 1892* quotes extensively from the 1860 version of Potter’s study.

<sup>48</sup> Reuben M. Potter, “Hymn of the Alamo,” in Graham, 11. See also Chemerka and Wiener, 16; 25-33; 51; Berry, 57-63, 65-66; 68-70.

The highly popular but fictional *Col. Crockett's Exploits and Adventures in Texas* appeared in the summer of 1836 and purported to be Crockett's diary of his experiences in Texas and at the Alamo. It was rich in auditory details, including songs that were purportedly sung and descriptions of voices, told in a folksy, Crockett-esque idiom. The entry for March 5<sup>th</sup>, the last full day of the siege, leaves the reader not with a picture but an echo: "Pop, pop, pop! Bom, bom, bom! throughout the day.—No time for memorandums now.—Go ahead!—Liberty and independence forever!"<sup>49</sup>

Some sounds played more dramatically on the imaginations of later generations of Alamo mythmakers than the defenders themselves. According to Reuben Potter's Mexican sources, "Deguello," the cavalry march meaning no quarter, was played after the charge was sounded during the final battle.<sup>50</sup> It is not possible to know how often it was played during the siege, or if the Texans knew of its threatening meaning. Travis emphasized that the "blood red" flag Santa Anna displayed meant that no prisoners would be taken, however he makes no mention of "Deguello."<sup>51</sup> Neither do any of the Texan survivors. Since it was a cavalry march rather than a call associated with a particular command, there is a chance that the Mexican prisoner who interpreted bugle calls would not know the meaning of the tune. Nevertheless, the aural declaration of no quarter found a place in Alamo mythology. In her old age, San Antonio resident Andrea Castañon de Villanueva, popularly known as Madam Candelaria, claimed to have been in

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<sup>49</sup> "Colonel Crockett's Exploits and Adventures in Texas," in David Crockett, *The Autobiography of David Crockett* (New York: Scribner's, 1923), 328.

<sup>50</sup> Potter, 1878, 11.

<sup>51</sup> Travis to Convention, March 3, 1836, in Groneman, 11-12; Travis to unidentified friend, March 3, 1836, in Groneman, 13.

the Alamo during the siege and battle. Her accounts were most likely fraudulent, but popular, and helped amplify “Deguello” in Alamo memory. An 1899 interview recorded that before dawn on March 6, “The duguelo [deguello] was sounded and Mme. says that they all very well understood what it meant, and every man prepared to sell his life as dearly as possible.”<sup>52</sup> It filtered into histories of the Alamo and poetry as a sound of horror and symbol of Santa Anna’s inhumanity.<sup>53</sup>

Another foundational aural motif of Alamo memory comes not from the battle of the Alamo itself but from the consummation of Texas independence at the Battle of San Jacinto on April 21, 1836. Sounds of vengeance, first unleashed at San Jacinto were repeated through the Mexican War, and contributed substantially to the contemporary literature about the Alamo. The Texan victors at San Jacinto, shouting the battle cry “Remember the Alamo!” were in a way commemorating that battle with the totalizing sound of their voices; a part of their experience that veterans’ accounts frequently dwelt upon. At a public dinner in 1837, Republic of Texas Vice President Mirabeau B. Lamar described the battle cry as “one continued loud roar, like the waters of a cataract.”<sup>54</sup> On an emotional level, this facet of auditory memory testifies that the Alamo might not have become the touchstone for Texas identity it did without the battle of San Jacinto to give it

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<sup>52</sup> Andrea Castañon de Villanueva (Madam Candelaria), February 19, 1899, in Groneman, 138.

<sup>53</sup> Henry Ryder Taylor, *History of the Alamo and of the local Franciscan missions* (n.p.: N. Tengg, 1908), 51, <http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth14389/> (accessed April 7, 2016), University of North Texas Libraries, the Portal to Texas History; crediting UNT Libraries, Denton, Texas; Viola Riley Berry, *The Alamo, and other poems* (Denton, TX: News Publishing Company, 1906), 68. <http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth14394/> (accessed April 7, 2016), University of North Texas Libraries, the Portal to Texas History; crediting UNT Libraries Special Collections, Denton, Texas.

<sup>54</sup> “General M.B. Lamar,” *Matagorda Bulletin*, December 6, 1837 p. 2. The Portal to Texas History, <http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth80332/>. (Accessed April 12, 2016)

closure and purpose. The sound of the battle cry at San Jacinto was a much more accessible metaphor to an early Texas audience. On a practical level, there were simply far more survivors from San Jacinto to give their aural remembrances of the battle. The lines, “‘And *Alamo* hereafter be/ In bloodier fields the battle cry.’/ Thus Travis from the rampart cried...” in the second verse of Reuben Potter’s popular “Hymn of the Alamo” demonstrate how the aural vengeance at San Jacinto became a key element of the Alamo of Texan memory.<sup>55</sup> The Alamo’s potency as a battle cry did not wear off after San Jacinto. Rather, Texans revived it—at least rhetorically—in subsequent conflicts with Mexico.<sup>56</sup> Potter’s lines invoking the Alamo as battle cry were quoted in an article about Texas troops bound for Mexico in 1846.<sup>57</sup>

The poetry and prose of the immediate aftermath evoked the aural, but in very specific ways: they spoke of glory, not terror. Cries for surrender<sup>58</sup> and the sounds of bayonets, rifle or musket butts making contact with men’s bodies<sup>59</sup> did not figure into the aural vocabulary of the Alamo’s popular memory. In part, this was because the sources

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<sup>55</sup> Graham, 11. If it seems I put too much interpretive weight on Potter’s “Hymn of the Alamo,” bear in mind that it remained very popular with Texans throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. *The Texas Democrat* remarked that “These lines, in point of genuine poetic fervor, are not surpassed by any in the English Language.” See “Reuben M. Potter, Esq.,” *The Texas Democrat* (Austin, Tex.), December 16, 1846, p. 2, The Portal to Texas History, <http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph48346/>. (Accessed April 2, 2016). See also J. H. Brown, 569, for his praise of Potter’s poem.

<sup>56</sup> William R. Chemerka and Allen J. Wiener, *Music of the Alamo* (Houston: Bright Sky Press, 2008), 35-39.

<sup>57</sup> “Provisions for the Texas Troops,” *The Texas Democrat* (Austin, Tex.), December 16, 1846, p. 2, The Portal to Texas History, <http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph48346/>. (Accessed April 2, 2016). Other sounds of San Jacinto’s vengeance continued to be called upon, see also “A New ‘Welcome to the Bower’” in Philip Graham, comp. and ed., *Early Texas Verse: 1835-1850* (Austin: Steck, 1936), 12.

<sup>58</sup> De la Peña, 51.

<sup>59</sup> Esparza, 1902, in Matovina, 71.

that mentioned them were not known of or sought after until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The aural experiences of noncombatant survivors had been gradually becoming more important. No one reason reveals itself for why this trend emerged, but sensory descriptions of the battle of the Alamo became fuller, darker, more personal and human (at least more familiar as such to the modern reader) as the late 19<sup>th</sup> century wore into the 20<sup>th</sup>. Certainly the fact that the generations which had experienced the Texas Revolution were dying off around the early 20<sup>th</sup> century provoked an interest in squeezing every last detail from surviving witnesses, gleaning accounts from men like Pablo Díaz or José María Rodríguez, whose main experience of the battle had been auditory rather than visual.<sup>60</sup> The *San Antonio Light* even foregrounded the aural in the title of their 1909 interview with Pablo Díaz: “THIS MAN HEARD SHOTS FIRED AT BATTLE OF ALAMO.”<sup>61</sup>

Another potential reason for the collection of increasingly vivid sensory depictions of the battle could involve the experience of the American Civil War. With the overwhelming sensory experience of war affecting such a vast number of Americans,<sup>62</sup> it may be that attitudes toward the historical relevance of these experiences shifted. Susanna Dickinson, probably the best known of the Alamo survivors, gave five interviews in the 1870s and 1880s.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> “This Man Heard Shots Fired at Battle of Alamo,” *San Antonio Light*, October 31, 1909, in Matovina, 96-97.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid; José María Rodríguez, *Rodríguez Memoirs of Early Texas*, 1913, in Matovina, 113-15.

<sup>62</sup> Smith, “The Smell of Battle, The Taste of Siege,” 2-8.

<sup>63</sup> Groneman, 88-93, 96-101, 111-112.

If anything about the readers of these newspapers as consumers of history can be learned from the behavior of editors and interviewers, it shows that they wanted a grittier and more personal understanding of the battle of the Alamo. Aurality strongly marked this understanding, and newspaper interviews described the sounds of their witnesses' voices, how their Spanish or English sounded, and when emotion choked their voices. Enrique Esparza gave his 1907 interview in English, and interviewer Charles Merritt Barnes prefaced Esparza's narrative with the remark that "nothing he says is marred but is emphasized by his mode of speech."<sup>64</sup> The *San Antonio Express* noted that Mrs. María de Jesús Buquor's impish laugh at remembering an old blind woman who fell into a cellar as a bullet "whistled by" revealed she still possessed "childhood's idea of humor."<sup>65</sup>

With the uptick in attention to aurality, more voices of women, children, and Tejanos were added to Alamo memory. Although knowledge produced by hearing was taken more seriously, and although the aural descriptions often became grittier, most aural descriptions of the siege and battle continued to serve the purposes of Texan identity, the valorization of the Alamo defenders, and the vilification of Santa Anna and the Mexican Army. Especially during the period of the Republic of Texas (1836-1846), the stirring, glorious invocations of sound at the Alamo were part of the crafting of Texan identity, the propaganda of establishing moral legitimacy, attracting volunteers, settlers, and alliances. A struggling rebellion needed heroes to avenge; a fledgling nation needed a symbol with which to build an identity and present itself to the world. It is not that the

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<sup>64</sup> Esparza, 1907, in Matovina, 78.

<sup>65</sup> "Witnessed Last Struggle of the Alamo Patriots," *San Antonio Express*, 19 July 1907, in Matovina, 89-91.

earliest accounts lacked description of the auditory experience of battle, nor that the descriptions were disingenuous. This was simply a specifically value-laden aurality, shaped by time and place. The silences in the historical record and in memory reflect how aurality was thought of, the value that placed on it, and the purposes it served.



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