

SO! L.A.: Sounding the California Story

Bridget Hoida

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Abstract

Editor's Note: Welcome to the second installment in our month-long exploration of listening in observation of World Listening Day on July 18, 2012. For the full introduction to the series click [here](#). To peep the previous post, click [here](#). Otherwise, whip out your most oversized sunglasses, kick back, and listen to Bridget Hoida's California. –JSA — STOP.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Article, Identity, Language, Libraries



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<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/bh-intro.mp3>

STOP.

Do not read along with me "in your book."

Resist the temptation to follow along with your eyes.

Click play. Listen.



Sunset in the San Joaquin Valley

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/2-bh-2.mp3>

If I had things my way, I would whisper these stories to you as we sat in mesh folding chairs on the poured concrete porch of my [Central Valley](#) childhood home. If I had things my way, I would refill your glass with lemons and gin, and we would breathe in the sweet, summer smell of rotting blackberry brambles. If I had things my way, we would wait until the sun set against a Tokay harvest, taking with it the harsh triple digit temperature and leaving us nothing but the quiet of a delta breeze and moonlight. If I had it my way, I would ask you to lean in close as I whisper with canonical voices:

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/3-didion-vo.mp3>

“This is a story about love and death in the golden land, ...”

–[Joan Didion](#)

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/4-inada-vo.mp3>

“I remember that moment exactly, those exact words registering in my mind like the notes of a solo...”

–[Lawson Fusao Inada](#)

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/5-mcdaniel-vo.mp3>

“Bobby Gene was a tattletale he told everything he heard...”

– [Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel](#)

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/6-mhkingston1.mp3>

“You must not tell anyone what I am about to tell you...”

–[Maxine Hong Kingston](#)

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/7-salvador-plascencia-vo.mp3>

“My history is murky, and I wanted it [...] that way so I could be free to tell whatever I wanted.”

– [Salvador Plascencia](#)

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/8-mhkingston2.mp3>

“I’ll tell you what I suppose from your silences and few words and you can tell me if I’m mistaken. You’ll have to speak up with the real stories if I’ve got you wrong...”

– [Maxine Hong Kingston](#)

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/9-villarreal-vo-8.mp3>

“And so they talked and told tales of their region, and I listened. Long into the night I listened until I dropped off to sleep and my father would pick me up onto his lap as he continued to talk about the Revolution.... And every camp was different, none existing for more than six or seven weeks, then off we would go to the next harvest, where new people would gather and there would be new tales to be told and heard. I knew when I was six years old that the one thing I most wanted from life was to be a storyteller.

–[Jose Antonio Villarreal](#)

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/mashup.mp3>

The storied sound of California

–All Voices

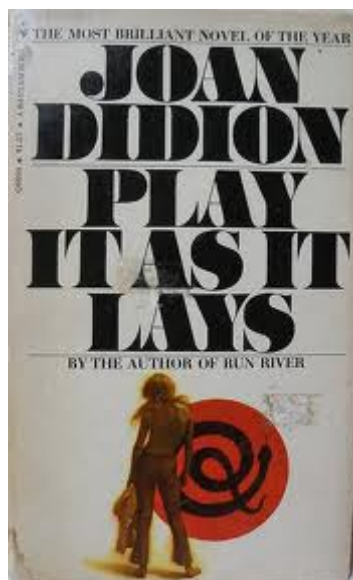
<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/10-bh-3.mp3>

Shush.... Listen.

Linger with me on the drawn-out drawl of the stories I was raised on. Of the stories I was raised **upon**. For this is the sound of the California story: A myriad of voices sounding out narratives onto the page. Conflicting, concurring, spoken-over and rewrote...no one lasts longer than the next harvest, the next filmic “Action!” This is the sound of the storied terrain of interwoven melodies spoken upon the California soil that I call home.

1.

In or around 1995, I fell madly in love with [Joan Didion](#). It’s not so much Didion the woman but rather the sound of Didion’s words that have me so hung up. My obsession began in the stacks of the [Bancroft Library](#) at [UC Berkeley](#). I was assistant to the assistant librarian there and during my lunch hour I would take the dumb waiter up to the roof, eat a Kaiser roll with apricot jam, and read dime store copies of classic novels. I chose the roof because I like to read aloud, and in libraries at the time, reading aloud, especially to yourself, was expressly forbidden.

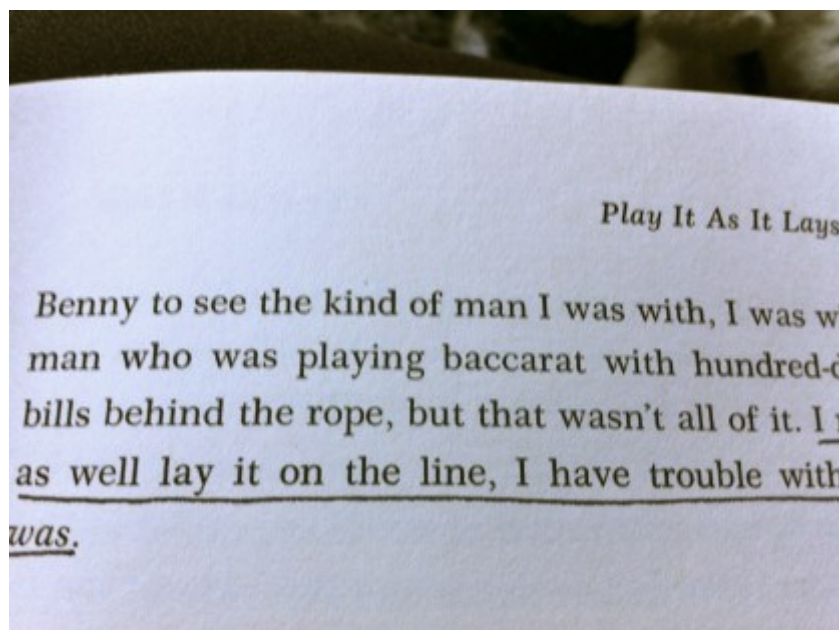


So there I was on the roof of Bancroft, with my roll, my jam, and my dime store copy of *Play It As It Lays*. I opened the page and read something about snakes and lago. A mother died, the town of Silver Wells was won, and then lost, in much the same way a marriage slips into divorce. And then it happened. I stumbled across a line that changed the way I thought about words. Page 7, the first full sentence of the top paragraph, on the right: *I might as well lay it on the line, I have trouble with as it was.*

And after that line a whole lot of white space.

Beautiful, brilliant, blank white space.

As though in the silence of the rooftop, of the view, Didion was screaming to the reader, to me, something louder than words. In that white space there was sound and it was deafening. Play it as it Lays by Joan Didion



Later, when I decided to get a [Ph.D. in creative writing](#), and although I couldn't say as much on paper, *examine, among other things, the commonality of language in California writers and the sonic devices of oral storytelling*, I came across a quote from Didion, [in interview](#), that said:

I had the technical intention to write a novel so elliptical and fast [...] it would scarcely exist on the page at all...white space. Empty space. [...] A white book to which the reader would have to bring his or her own bad dreams...

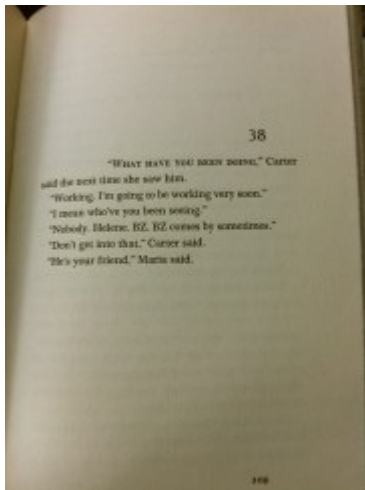
And although I adore everything about her I almost wished she hadn't said it. Or that I hadn't read it, because the thing about Didion is that statement... the part about the blank space... and the nightmare... it was already there. On the roof of the Bancroft library with my Kaiser roll and apricot jam, when the air tasted like September, I brought my own bad dreams because in that brilliant bit of white space I *heard* the scream.

3.

I like the white page. I prefer stories to plots. Plot for me is how the narrative moves from one space in time (from one line on the page) to the next. Story is how the narrative **sounds**. Story is voice. Plots are where girls meet boys and girls lose boys and girls get boys back. Stories are the shuffle and stop of scuffed shoes walking railroad levees, old men clearing phlegm, the surprise of an elastic bikini band as it snaps against the freshly burnt back of a burgeoning starlet. And the sounds of words as they smack unbridled against the page.



a traditional page by John Steinbeck



a white page by Joan Didion

4.

When I read Didion we are on my porch and I *hear* her voice. When we think of writing, when we imagine reading, we think of quiet moments that exist alone with fixed type on a printed page. But as a reader, and more importantly as a writer, I have never felt this way.

5.

Voice, to paraphrase [Emily Dickinson](#), is the “slant” you bring to your version of “the truth.” Plots are recyclable. Hell, you can buy one on eBay, to be sure. But a writer’s voice is different. I don’t read a book to figure out what happens next. I read to hear the whisper of the author’s voice. If they whisper well, I turn the page.

6.

From [John Steinbeck](#) to [Gertrude Stein](#), [John Fante](#) to [Susan Straight](#), [Larry Levis](#) and [Mary Hunter Austin](#) to [William Saroyan](#) and [Shawna Yang Ryan](#), there is commonality of sound and language that I’m willing to claim composes an aural palimpsest of sorts. A voicing over, both literally and figuratively of native daughters and native sons held up on the tongue of the golden state.

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/bh-6.mp3>

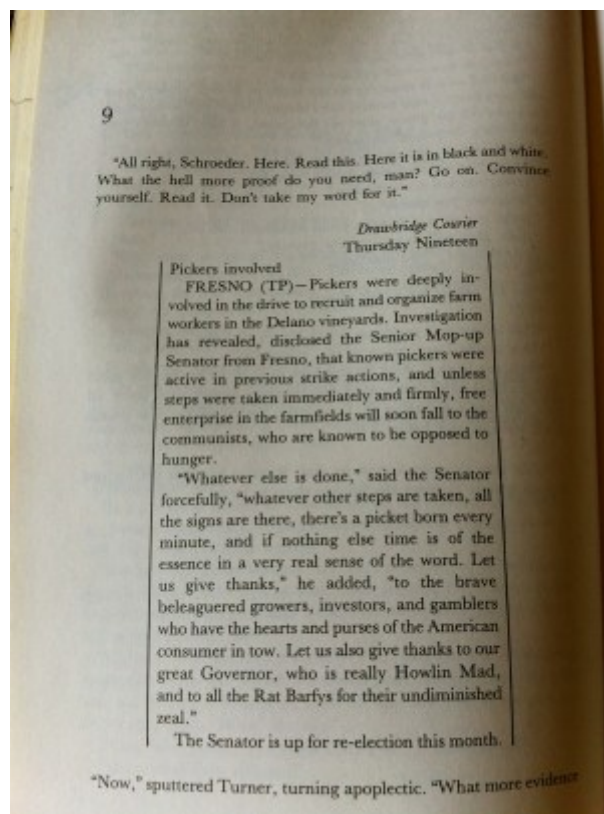
The cadence, the rhythm, the obsession with things past. The aching nostalgic longing. The reflection. The fear. The reclamation. The imagination. The witness of an agrarian undoing. [Sleepy Hollow moments](#) reborn—again and again on western soil. The feeling of home. The feeling of home slipping away. The feeling of self, self-made in the image of home, slipping away alongside it. There’s a certain Californianness to it.

7.

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What if we found a way to consider the sound these “fixed texts” emote? What if we broke with conventional narrative structure and embraced a written technique that more adeptly mirrored the sound and cadence of spoken story telling? Then might it be possible that the very auralty that is “written over” on the read palimpsest is in fact the sound that also remains?

As a writer, a writer who believes in voice, who rejoices in sounds as the strike-like syllables against a now forgotten Olivetti key, my pursuit in writing not only a novel, but in writing a novel *about California* was how I could possibly enter into this conversation. How I might be able to raise my voice loud enough to embrace the crowd of such a respectable page. How I could construct my text in such a way that it would not only read, but also sound *Californian*.



a “docu-page” by Raymond Barrio

8.

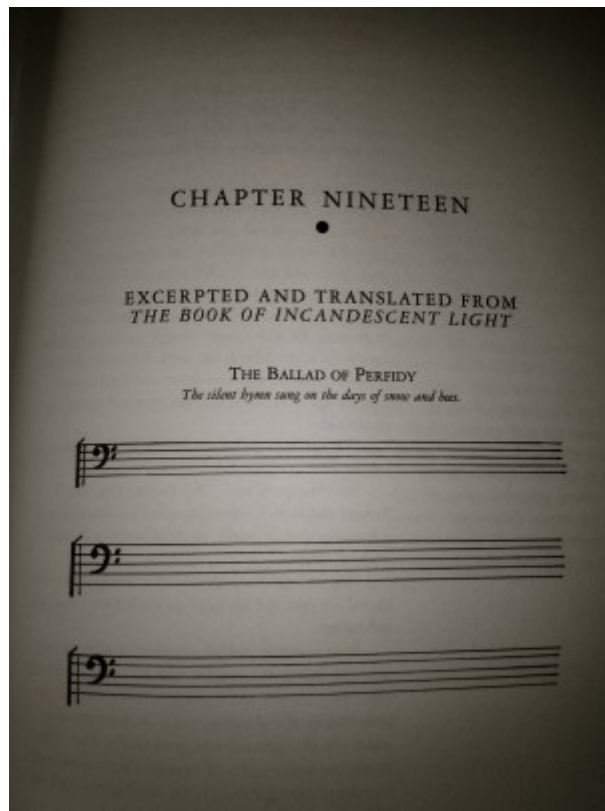
In my struggle to voice not only my novel, *So L.A.*, but also my protagonist Magdalena de la Cruz, I relied heavily on the patterns, soundscapes and literary devices of the collective California canon comprised of authors such as the ones I spoke of above. In *So L.A.* I was looking for a way to tell the story out loud while still operating within the conventional structure of a “type and text” book.



9.

My novel opens with Magdalena falling off a boat and then moves both forward and backward in time. This is how most people tell stories orally. They begin in the middle and then jump around, forgetting, amending, and calling attention to the most important parts, while the listener rarely ever exclusively listens but instead interjects and provides his or her own connections, observations and experiences. Eliminating quotations allowed me to access some of this interplay. It allowed me to question the reliability of spoken language. Spoken utterance does NOT always translate to precise hearing of the said words uttered. There is always interference—be it emotional (memory-sound triggers), psychological (felt meaning as opposed to said meaning), physical (honking cars, loud birds, eye rolls and sneezing) or linguistic (signifiers and unspoken gestures). Just because words are uttered does not mean they are the same words that are heard. And not only did I want this, but I needed it on my page. Although I considered the docunovel (in the vein of [Raymond Barrio](#)), autho-interview collage (like [Anna Deavere Smith](#)) and autofictive exploration (ala [Salvador Plascencia](#)) I ultimately decided to abandon quotation marks.





a “sounded” page from *The People of Paper*

10.

This (“) says open. It says start.

This (”) says closed. It says stop.

But (“) and (”) also sound.

For me they sound like a particularly rough clearing of the throat. They sound like standing on a library rooftop, trying to confess your love with the passion of a librarian “with hiccups.”

“They” interrupt the eye. “They” provide visual cues for accessing character and I didn’t want Magdalena “to be seen.” I wanted her to sound.

Her voice required a fluidity and unreliability not attainable “in quotes.” Without conventional quotes I was free to wander inside the head and voice of my protagonist as I pushed the blur between what she was saying, what the listener perceived she was saying, and what other characters were voicing without visual interruption.

11.

Also important in my authorial access to sound (and the absence of sound) on the fixed and written page was the use of filmic microchapters (some only as long as a single sentence). A sentence that reads as a chapter, surrounded by all that stark and lovely white space, not only

looks different from a classical bookish chapter, but it also sounds different. Read out loud, or quietly inside the reader's head, it sounds out a particular meaning and resonated differently within the mind's eye *and ear*.

12.

With so much of the present world turning virtual, author and storyteller [Barry Sanders](#) concludes, "We demand less from the historical accuracy of our stories. We even demand less of a truth. We are content with images and feelings. If it feels closer to the truth then it might as well be." However I'd like to extend Sander's assessment beyond image and feeling to include sound. In this newly constructed world of virtual storytelling we are again experiencing a shift (not unlike the shift from oral to written storytelling) that is also sound dependent and sonically informed. From the staccato sounds of Twitter as compared to the unconstricted and leisurely expanse of Tumblr, it is important to acknowledge that the twenty-second sound bite can be (and historically has been) used (and utilized) in fiction to make noise and call attention to lasting moments of profound revelation. Although Didion's Maria may "have trouble with how it was" I find a certain sense of comfort in *how it is* provided we are all able to lean in close and listen. Listen past the interference of type, text and YouTube to the sound of words both on *and upon* the page as,

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/12-williams.mp3>

"These are tales told in darkness in the quiet at the end of the day's heat..."

– [Shirley Anne Williams](#)

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Opening Image Credit: "L.A. Sky at Sunset" by Flickr User David Vienna

Audio note: Voices used, with the exception of Bridget Hoida, are not the actual voices of the authors listed, nor are they meant to be representative of said authors.

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[Bridget Hoida](#) is the author of [So L.A.](#) (2012). In a past life she was a librarian, a DJ, a high school teacher, and a barista. In this life she experiments with words and has taught writing at UC Irvine, the University of Southern California and is currently a professor at Saddleback College. Hoida is the recipient of an Anna Bing Arnold Fellowship and the Edward Moses prize for fiction. She was a finalist in the Joseph Henry Jackson/San Francisco Intersection for the Arts Award for a first novel and the William Faulkner Pirate's Alley first novel contest. Her short stories have appeared in the [Berkeley Fiction Review](#), [Mary](#), and [Faultline Journal](#), among others, and she was a finalist in the Iowa Review Fiction Prize and the Glimmer Train New Writer's Short Story Contest. Her poetry has been recognized as an Academy of American Poets Prize finalist and she was a Future Professoriate Scholar at USC.

She has a BA from UC Berkeley, a MA in fiction from San Francisco State University, and a Ph.D. in Literature and Creative Writing from the University of Southern California. [So L.A.](#) is her first novel.