

Mirna B. Radin-Sabadoš*
University of Novi Sad, Faculty of Philosophy
English Department

CA BLUES – THE NOISE OF AMERICANA

Abstract: The novel *CA Blues* in Serbian literature remains a unique testimonial and a particular projection of a fictional America, seen through the eyes of a “neo-beatnik” protagonist that is often described as “decadent, post-hippie and pre-punk California”. It remained a “cult novel” telling a story about many faces of freedom; however, the interpretations often remained at the surface level. This research focuses on the structural patterns of the novel’s fictional universe, which reflect literary traditions not only beatnik but also modernist, particularly in the idea of creating *soundscapes* which becomes manifest in the design of the two sections of the novel based on the conceptualization and physical description of radio waves (AM/FM). Oklopdžić’s literary devices create the unique experience of the fictional Americana by inviting the readers to immerse into sensory experiences of the protagonist, within the events, in the noise in the background and in the deliberate interruptions and shifts of focus. The paper investigates the aspects of the aural experience and its significance in the shaping of the text, as a specific cultural signature which places this novel in a dialogue with some of the major American novelists.

Keywords: *CA Blues* (novel), soundscapes, Americana, sound in fiction, noise.

CA Blues was first published in 1981 and in retrospect, it is best known as autobiographical fiction offering a close-up insight into a fictionalized personal experience of the San Francisco area in the mid 70s, a glimpse of what became of California, the promised land of the *beatniks*. For an average Yugoslav reader, distant both in time and in space, yet irresistibly mesmerizing and seductive. However, the portrait of American consumer culture, along with the rather new and raw insight into the limits of personal freedom: relationships, sexuality and drug experimenting, frequently

* mirna.radin.sabados@ff.uns.ac.rs

resulted in reception which dismissed the novel as catering to the popular tastes, being overtly commercial or “light”. Although it was shortlisted for the NIN award in 1981, the commercial aspect of the novel nevertheless cast a long and overwhelming shadow. It was popular; it won the “Miloš Crnjanski” Award, saw six editions and over a 100.000 copies in Yugoslavia which granted it a cult status among younger readers. The literary appraisal was, however rather limited. Although Igor Mandić declared that “Oklopdžić wrote one of the most original books in our contemporary prose. His *CA Blues* is absolutely incommensurable with the parameters of the our contemporary novel, to such an extent it stands out from the familiar stylistic patterns...”(Oklopdžić 1986). On the other hand, “the dominant literary circles” who championed the traditions of realism, rejected both the novel and its author; we can assume either failing to recognize the carefully constructed narrative experiment and its many obvious links to the greatest works of American and English literature, or perhaps precisely because they did recognize its excessive novelty and its repudiation of the conventional realist approach to literary text.

CA Blues is dedicated to Jack Kerouac and emphatically labelled “romanscen” which indicates that it is perhaps intended to be read as a blend of a novel and a film script. It certainly reinforces the need to establish a debate on the levels of fictionality, both of the events and of the narrator(s), rather than interpret it simply as a reflection of the author’s past. In addition to the offer of the metatextual inscription, the book is divided in two sections, introduced by explicit reading instructions by the author:

In the first part (AM), amplitude modulation has lazy features, thus the personae and the action is somewhat slow; in the second part (FM), frequency modulation is recurrent, so the characters, events and dialogues etc. are adequately accelerated.

.....

The text is flexible, in all its points and adapts to the frequencies of the readers and viewers.

The AM/FM distinction operates as a metaphor on a metatextual level by invoking the medium of radio: firstly it emphasizes the process of coding as a method of communicating the message – the involved characters and events are arranged in a particular manner, pointing out that the stories do not occur, but are deliberately constructed. The first part (AM) is a sequence of encounters and events which culminate with the love story of the protagonist which stands out as if it were the peak amplitude in terms of

time stretch and the level of involvement and finally resolves in denouement. The in second part (FM) represents an attempt in fictional exploration of the limits of the self and the boundaries of freedom. It is coded to vary the intensity (or frequency) of the experiences which all belong to the same cycle. Secondly, the AM/FM in a more literal manner introduces the presence of the medium that is primarily aural, promoting sound as a constitutive layer of the narrative, equal to the visual if not super ordinate in the construction. Finally, the remark about flexibility of the text invites negotiations between the text (not the author) and the reader as a process of creating meaning.

Although it is fair to assume that the introductory remarks about radio broadcast refer primarily to the structural aspects of the novel, it is also necessary to take into account the context in which this portrait of American culture interacts with its readers. Shifting the focus on the medium of radio is a clever solution which reinforces the assumed hetero-perception of America, both on the part of the author and certainly on the part of readers, at the same time gradually establishing the network of background noises, a particular “soundscape” that Don DeLillo would call the “technological hum” of the consumer culture. In this respect, *CA Blues* is a text with an acute consciousness of the importance of the sensory inputs as well as of “The capacity of the literary to open up ‘fictional worlds at a geographical and temporal remove’ affords it a prosthetic function as ‘a highly refined, and highly effective, extension of our senses.” In addition to the inevitable visual aspect, it deliberately treats a “literary text as a site of vocalisation, rhythmic and dissonance as well as an archive of soundscapes and modes of listening” (Snaith 2020: 2). Oklopdžić in *CA Blues* starts experimenting with channelling different sensory information, occasionally splitting the page between video and audio reports (Oklopdžić 1986: 285). He further explored the possibilities of the literary text to communicate diverse sensory information in a more direct manner in the novel *Video* published in 1982.

1. LITERARY SOUNDSCAPES OF *CA BLUES*

Opening a discussion on the sonic dimension of a literary text in a collection of essays *Sound in Literature* (2020), the collection’s editor Anna Snaith begins by offering a factual explanation of the physical nature of sound: it is a mechanical wave made of molecules travelling through a medium. It has immersive properties in the sense that animate beings experience the

sound waves on the point of contact with their bodies. The contact initiates physiological processes – the chain of vibrations is transformed into electrical signal transmitted along the auditory nerve to the brain. On the level of metaphor, this process could explain the effect of immersion into a different culture – it conceptualizes a “world of moving and colliding objects and their radiating impact” (Snaith 2020: 2). On the surface level, sound as vibration “is the ground of existence” (2). Snaith further explains that the experiments with typography, punctuation or internal monologue are just some of the ways in which writers play with or reject the conventions of vocal representation thus engaging with a politics of voice. *CA Blues* complies with the described approach. The novel starts with a radio commercial printed in capital letters establishing the convention to signal communicating auditory information. In the first chapter, the excitement of the new environment and circumstances alternates with the vibrations of the sounds grounding the experience – in addition to radio, it introduces human voice enhanced by microphone, random fragments of music coming in waves and a mix of remembered sound sequences emulating the experience of sexual intercourse. The sonic disrupts the written precisely because it triggers and evokes a sense and medium other than the one used to experience it. The powerful effect can be explained as an emphasis on the gap between experience and representation. While narrative sections focus on the visual and very dynamically alternate with dialogues and commentaries creating the flow, the whirlwind of the fragmented auditory stimuli allow the reader to share the narrator’s sensory experiences. “Hearing is associated with interiority, subjectivity, affect, temporality and passivity, whereas sight is harnessed to distance, reason, spatiality and control” (Snaith 2020: 7). Yet “Sound can be both a weapon of warfare and a means of bonding individuals and communities to each other, to a place or to a past encounter.” (Snaith 2020: 2) This kind of bonding does not only connect the reader and the narrator, but operates diachronically connecting the literary experiment of the *beatniks* to their much younger acolyte seeking to tread in their shoes. The insistence on the auditory dimension of the experience is as much a matter of author’s individual preference as it is certain literary homage to Jack Kerouac; as are the chosen topoi (San Francisco Bay Area, Big Sur) and the music (jazz) in the narrative. For example, Kerouac’s *Visions of Cody* present the transcripts of the recordings of his conversations with Neal Cassady – “Frisco: The Tape” but also the section “Imitation of the Tape” that contains fictionalized tape transcripts (Teague 2021: 93). For Kerouac

the tape recorder was a device which enabled him not only to “document life” however ambiguously, as the early recordings of Ginsberg, Kerouac and Burroughs did capturing “readings and conversation laced over radio music and party sounds” (94), but to capture the moment in its entirety of experience emphasizing memory at face value, becoming a vehicle for nostalgia (95). *CA Blues* is following in Kerouac’s footsteps creating its own ‘imitation of the tape’, channelling both visual and auditory creating the narrative technique as an echo of the technological interface between media, memory, and fiction. Although the tape-recorder as a device became ubiquitous as sort of a fictional prop across periods and genres in contemporary American fiction (from John Barth to Joan Didion, Tom Wolfe and Margaret Atwood), *CA Blues* does not literally follow the established patterns, but rather expands the concept by introducing the metaphor of the broadcasting technology as the underlying principle of its fictional world. Rather than aiming for the totality of the recorded narrow space/time continuum, it allows the interference in its (fictional) recording, that is, employs the components with which the fictional continuum is constructed without limiting it to a kind of unilateral mechanical operation often picking up the unwanted, usually declared as noise. What is more, the actual ‘recorder’, as well as the reproducer, is not a mechanical device but the consciousness and the authentic voice of the narrator and the protagonist who creates his own archive of ‘aural imagery’ which we see as a structure of literary representations of sound – dialogue, music, screams, cries, laughter, and extraverbal sounds, as well as full range of ambient sounds – capturing the sensory input that has a purpose to activate a reader’s “inner hearing” and bring attention to the way sound works in the world but also how textual form creates its own particular sound worlds (Snaith 2020: 9). Following the traditions of American novel, establishing the authentic voice is among the most important fictional elements of *CA Blues*. The analogy of the tape recorder is often used as a vehicle for the intimate, the personal, and even the confessional, but perhaps its greatest value is in the exploration of how sound works as a signifier. Additionally, the paratextual information, along with the “credits” (listing the characters as “participants” (Oklopđić 1986: 389) also contains a final remark printed in capital letters – “AM/FM’ 1980 MONOCOLOR ALL THE CLOSEUP SITUATIONS AND CLOSEUP SHOTS IN THE BOOK RECORDED WITH THE OLYMPIA TRAVELLER DELUXE TYPEWRITER” (391). In the language of film closeup shots are used often as cutaways from a scene recorded from a greater distance, and those are

used to display the most detail, before all, to convey emotion. Although this remark is often interpreted as a stunt it signals the author's desire to direct the reader's attention to the stylistic features of the text and the experimental nature of its literary technique which blends the verbal and the audiovisual.

In her consideration of the essay by Virginia Woolf on the relationship of the literary form and its sonic environment, Helen Groth concludes that "the literary soundscape... is not divorced from the social or natural sound world in which it is created and consumed, it is of it, in it, and contributes to its construction" (Groth 2020: 135). She explains that the sound cannot be separated nor excluded from the process of writing or reading since it too participates in the production of the work of art and structures its relationship to "other texts, objects, people, and institutions in relations of dependency, involvement, and interaction" (135). Groth points out that in one of the many examples Woolf comments that "it is impossible...for modern writers to produce dramatic verse like Shakespeare in the absence of the noise of Elizabethan street life" (136) and accordingly she claims that "the letters, words, lines take shape on the page in radically different ways depending on the sound world in which they are embedded" (136) resulting in a particular literary *soundscape* either as a representation, mediation or a manner of registering sound in literature. The idea of the soundscape was originally related to the literature of modernism and defined as a network of related sounds and sound patterns, while even the literature of realism was often interpreted also as a sonic archive, particularly with respect to the works which introduce the idea of "ear-witnessing" and to the acoustic precision of the writers such as Leo Tolstoy, Thomas Hardy, William Faulkner or Thomas Mann (Groth 2020: 137). However, Virginia Woolf rejects the idea of "the book" as merely a "descriptive mimetic repertoire" (137) to be arranged accordingly in order to represent an accurate record of the particular sonic environment. Woolf claimed that the form and definition of the work of literature is constantly being influenced by the layer of sounds produced by the environment, or the world, at a particular moment in time. For Woolf, her radically altered sonic environment included new forms that reflected atomization of lives, desensitization by the consumption of violence through the news of the world and the powerless position of individuals and the changed perception of the environment, reflected in the soundscapes, was the product of the alteration of the material environment (138). In particular she observes the radio as a "solipsistic form" whose promise of the "connective sociability" intrudes on people's privacy and creates distractions

by the increased acoustic stimulus. The radio in *CA Blues* corresponds to the model proposed by Woolf, both with respect to the distracting effect and to the idea of projecting a time/space determined unique soundscape that has the capacity to constitute and alter literary form.

On the other hand Groth also offers an interpretation by Emily Thompson who defines soundscape as as both a physical environment and a cultural construction of that world that incorporates technological and aesthetic *ways of listening*, which introduces the idea of the predetermined listener in specific social circumstances and with specific relationship to their environment which influences their perception of aural information (138). *CA Blues* deploys the “connective sociability” of the radio broadcasts focusing both on the advertisements and on the content of the program, yet it rather systematically avoids the kind of content that would dislodge the narration from the narrowly defined and highly specific time/space continuum. The radio commercials advertise local clubs and restaurants, various kinds of entertainment (including strip-tease, gay, lesbian and transsexual performers) and services (from new films to massage parlors) as well as common household items (shampoo, margarine, tampons, water beds, beer, shaving cream, Tourister suitcases, otc medications, Kodak instamatic, coffee) while the program is a collage of content from local crime report (Oklopdžić 1986: 28–9), to the announcement of an interview with Carolyn Cassady (116). The references to people or events that could be recognized by the readers are conspicuously marginal, revolving around celebrity anecdotes like the one about the son of president Ford and George Harrison (74), or short notices; Garry Snyder winning Pulitzer Prize (165), the death of the jazz musician Gene Ammons (181), the Rolling Stones concert and Hell’s Angels (295), George Benson (307), Patty Hearst being released (322), Cher giving birth to a son (355). Therefore, the Americana invoked through the “connective sociability” remains emphatically limited despite cultural transformation that introduced television as a ubiquitous medium and national broadcasting, which could serve as an archive of representational samples. Oklopdžić follows the concept introduced by Woolf, deploying the chosen sound fragments with an intention to make them function as an integral part of the text, rather than just serve as an anchor point or an intermezzo between the events. The radio fragments cut into the middle of conversations, split the event, introduce a temporary shift of focus which consciously prevents or interrupts immersion but also signals towards the narrator’s consciousness corresponding to the Thompson’s idea of “a

listener's relationship to their environment, and the social circumstances that dictate who gets to hear what" (Groth 2020: 138).

2. REWRITING THE SELF: ABOUT THE AUDITORY I

The first person narration of *CA Blues* necessarily points to the construction and the narration of the self – even in the context of autobiographical prose, but more so with respect to the emphatic presence of aural. As one of the main themes of the novel is the exploration of the limits self and the boundaries of freedom, the narration of *CA Blues* opens its own debate on the conceptualization of the self by self which broadly corresponds to the modernist concept of the making and the unmaking of the self as introduced by Steven Connor as the self that wills itself into being:

One story about modernity would identify it with the apprehension of the self's autonomous self-grounding, the positive precipitate of the act of expelling all inauthenticity and error from the self. Only by such an act of autogenetic faith, it appears, can the self give rise to itself in the characteristically modern, modernist and, some would say, rather more than implicitly masculinist manner. (Connor 1997: 203)

Steven Connor elaborates on the concept of self in relation to the sensory perception pointing out an aspect that is most important for fiction – the idea of the self as seeing and self-seeing entity as a consequence of technological rationality, where, we conceive the transforming self as active and separate from nature, which is thought to be passive, constraining and unconscious (206). Further consequences of the separation, according to Connor, resulted in what Heidegger named *Gestell* – the framing of the world as an image, a “separated object of knowledge”. It is a convention in the perception which transfers as a norm in the process of the construction of fictional universe. Vision enables sensory input that allows ample distance, it supports differentiation of the self from its environment and “the experience of the world as separate from myself” (206) and the identification of the self in the acknowledgement of the separation. Connor explains that it is precisely the normalization of this worldview and the establishment of vision as primary source of the sensory stimuli which produced interest in “those relations between the self and its environment which cannot be reduced to sight...defining importance... of the sense of hearing, and the other non-visual senses with which it is associated” (207). The chosen dominant media (radio, recorded music, performed music BUT not television) and the

environmental sensory input (conversations, speeches, sounds emitted by people) that *CA Blues* relies on function in accordance with the concept of the transforming self of the narrator – however, the novelty of the transformation allows immersion effect to reach almost to the level of visceral response. It establishes the self of the narrator “in terms of hearing rather than sight is a self imaged not as a point, but as a membrane; not as a picture, but as a channel through which voices, noises and musics travel” (207). The medium of radio stresses the idealized features of sound, those of omnipresence and the assumed non-directionality and mobility of sound as opposed to vision, that is perceived as “intermittent, separative and fixating” (207). Offering the juxtaposition of information filtering in the mind of the narrator through the separate audio and video channels the narrator transmits his cocaine enhanced experience of the epistemological experiment; starting as listening to the voice of a woman on a walkie-talkie – “All I can see is your voice...isn’t that weird?” (Oklopdžić 1986: 280) the conversation becomes a discussion about the radio waves: “Why is there two types of waves? Those are channels. It is existence on two levels. AM is the sluggish channel, usually used for the childhood memories...AM is used for birth and for death. FM is life... The past is always sluggish. That is the reason why there are devices which combine both, because you cannot exist in a single level...Can you forget the present if you stay in AM fro too long? You can, but all these solutions are *temporary*.” (282). The conversation, although it grows less and less coherent, anticipates a common space where the channels will be shared simultaneously in time as well as in space. From today’s point of view, this could be congruent with the anticipation of the world wide web. However, it arises from the concept of primarily auditory experience and broadcasting, the emphasis being on its capacity to disintegrate and reconfigure space. The concept contains a reference to the ideas contained in the core of modernity, as described by Steven Connor, especially the introduction of “a new kind of human subjectivity” (208) described by F.T. Marinetti, the founder of futurism. This kind of subject is perceived as instable modern self, the kind of self that is not a passive receptor or perceptor (or reflector), but the self *intercepted* by experiences, events or phenomena and continuously being “traversed, dissolved and remade” (208). The medium of the radio invited a possibility of an alternative perspective on the space seen as “rationalized ‘Cartesian grid’ of the visualist imagination” (206) and the self projected as a perceiving single point of view “from which the exterior world radiated in regular lines” (206). This alternative perspective is what the FM part of

CA Blues projects – although the time/space frame is defined as a road trip down the California coast, naming the well known landmarks (San Luis Obispo, Big Sur), the fictional space is conceived as somewhat distorted, “more fluid, mobile and voluminous” (206), allowing the firm grip of the first person narrative to dissolve, abolishing the duality of the consciousness of the observer observing his earlier self. It is achieved most strikingly by transforming the singular space of the visual into a plural, permeated space through the experience of the aural. This kind of space is imbued with the noise – “the ‘unwanted’ sound of communications theory, a counter cultural fetish object, a precondition of existence, a mode of exclusion or silencing” (Snaith 2020: 20).

3. THE NOISE OF AMERICANA

“America’s difference is established first through sound... it is the new noisy world of motor traffic, radio, gramophone and the talkies” (Mansell 2020: 161).

Noise is a component of everyday soundscapes, it is also the unwanted or unpredictable component in the process of communication. It opens the discussion on the aspects of literature, perceived as communication, focusing on the issues of meaning negotiation, the information overload and the ‘spillage’, something that has the potential to become a meaning making component because it will spill over the brim of the conventionally determined channel. Mansell points out that “[T]he noisiness of noise resides neither entirely in the sonic object, nor entirely in cultural meaning, but rather in what might be called the sonic encounter between hearer and heard, an encounter contingent on place and time” (Mansell 2020: 159). As an example, Mansell analyses how the study *America: the Menace* by the French novelist Georges Duhamel, defines the link between noise and culture. For Duhamel noise is dominantly negative notion associated with technology, motor traffic, and representing consumerist exchange done without much thought or consideration which results in a certain ‘easy’ culture. *CA Blues* offers its own particular cacophony of noises, its own “waves and radiation” of American culture, felt through the senses of a newcomer looking to discover something about himself in the process of interception of the sensations and experiences this culture had to offer confronting the consumerist to some other aspects of noise exploiting the idea of channel overflow or spillage. James Mansell discusses noise and its role in literature emphasizing that

the greatest value of the link between the sound and the written word is in our ability as readers to hear through the ears of the writer. In addition to providing an insight into the aural dimension of particular time and place, it has the power to suggest the meanings of the sounds and of the absences of sounds in time – “...writers use the printed word to ‘convey and even reproduce’ sounds in a way that captures both the acoustic properties of sound as well as its meaning to those who heard it” (Mansell 2020: 155) and they are also “involved in the social dynamics of noise precisely because noise must be created and ‘dramatised’ as such” (158).

Oklopdžić constructs the main episode of the AM section of the novel by juxtaposing what Georges Duhamel feared as machine-generated culture resulting from “radio and cinema generated unthinking crowd behavior” to an individual epiphany, through the experience of a live jazz performance. The moment when sound becomes socially active, Mansell labels the *sonic encounter*, and claims it to be both a bodily and a cultural experience. This encounter is the moment when the sound initiates formation of a community, grounded in the sharing of the hearing experience which makes them more real (159). The episode in *CA Blues* starts in the crowded Keystone Corner jazz club, where the musician’s performance at first strikes the protagonist as noise, although he was a jazz fan. What is more, he perceives the experience as if from the outside, as artificial – “I was indifferent. I was under the impression that the musician is here tonight to entertain me, Gaye, Ron and Sharma. As if he was a part of a program, as if all of us were a part of a television show and whatever was going on was just a segment of a larger unit” (Oklopdžić, 1986: 62). The protagonist gives us the detailed description of the music, the instruments, the rhythms, but also of his annoyance because he is conflicted, he observes but feels nothing. Then the situation changes, the couple establish a connection with each other and the protagonist suddenly becomes plugged in the environment responding to the sound. The sonic encounter symbolically marks the beginning of a personal relationship, the sound of Kirk Roland’s “Bright Moments” permeates the protagonist’s body and mind.

“First the sound resembled thunderstorm and tornado, then he took a step back from the microphone, so the melody sounded like the African love call, then he played lyrical theme, with a drawl and the full sound, and finally when the piano, the drum and the base decided to join in, he went to blues.” (Oklopdžić 1986: 66)

The sound is represented on the page with the handwritten music notation as the encounter exploded in a flood of abstract emotion – “Bright Moments, dreamers’ fantasy, a moment of self-reliance, freedom with an aura of adventure” (66). As if mocking the 1930s definition of noise related to social ordering of class and gender relations favoring “quiet, male, European, intellectual culture ... situated as a norm against which other sounds were judged” (Mansell 2020: 164), the episode establishes the transformation of live jazz performance from noise to sonic encounter as the ground zero of the true and real, deep and unmediated experience against which all the experiences will be judged. For the protagonist, it is the one event that would affect his self-perception and bear consequences, that would ultimately subvert the norm. “Bright Moments” is almost an illustration of the relationship of noise and literature, of the idea that “when the sonic is planned, so too is the social” (166). The novel continues its play with the sound, declaring it dependent on our choice and desire to hear it thus conditioning the encounters of people through the access to the “realm of audibility”(166). On the other hand, literatures themselves are arts of “noise” and *CA Blues* is perceived as a model of literature designed as the ‘noise of culture’ not ‘solely a privileged site for the representation of the noises of our acoustic world but itself a discourse that generated noise within the channels of cultural communication.

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Mirna B. Radin-Sabadoš

CA BLUES – BUKA AMERIKANE

Rezime: Roman *CA Blues* u srpskoj književnosti ostaje jedinstveno svedočanstvo i sasvim naročita slika zamišljene Amerike sagledane očima protagoniste „neo-bitnika”, koju često opisuju kao „dekadentnu, post-hipijevsku/proto-pankersku Kaliforniju”. Iako pripada drugom, jugoslovenskom vremenu, i danas se smatra kulturnim romanom koji pripoveda o doživljaju slobode, iako njegova tumačenja često ne sežu dalje od površine. Ovaj rad je posvećen pripovedačkom postupku i strukturi sveta fikcije u kojima se ogledaju književne tradicije ne samo bitnika već i modernizma, naročito u pogledu ideje stvaranja zvučnih pejzaža. Ova se tradicija očituje naročito u kompoziciji segmenata romana po ugledu na fizički opis radio talasa (AM/FM). Oklopdžićeva književna sredstva stvaraju jedinstveno fikciono iskustvo američke kulture pozivajući čitaoca da se uživi u čulna iskustva glavnog junaka kroz same događaje, ali i kroz buku u pozadini i kroz pažljivo postavljene upadice i promene fokusa. Rad istražuje različite aspekte iskustva slušanja i značaj tog iskustva u procesu oblikovanja teksta, budući da to iskustvo predstavlja naročito kulturno obeležje i otvara dijalog ovog romana sa nekim od veoma važnih književnih ostvarenja savremene američke književnosti.

Cljučne reči: *CA Blues* (roman), zvučni pejzaž, američka kultura, zvuk u fikciji, buka.