Drawing on acoustic measurements of more than 140,000 vowels recorded during interviews with 50 English speakers from Kansas City, this book rigorously examines the vowel systems of those living in this large metropolitan area in the center of the United States and traces a half-century of sound change from 1955 to 1999. Results confirm findings from previous studies for speakers born in the 1950s, but also reveal a series of recent innovations that challenge Kansas City’s characterization as a Midland dialect city—or more broadly challenge the characterization of the Midland dialect. Specific features examined include the low back vowel merger, the prenasal merger of /af/ and /æ/, the retraction of front lax vowels, the fronting of back vowels, and the allophonic raising of /æ/ before voiceless consonants. By examining these features in Kansas City, this volume updates knowledge about one speech community, but also contributes more generally to studies in the phonetics and phonology of American Englishes.

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