



INTRODUCTION

Media, Sound, and Culture

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*Every time I see the sun rise
Or a mountain that's so high
Just by seeing is believing
I don't need to question why
When I see a mighty ocean
That rushes to the shore.*

—Elvis Presley, “Seeing Is Believing”

For twenty-five centuries, western knowledge has tried to look upon the world. It has failed to understand that the world is not for beholding. It is for hearing. It is not legible, but audible.

—Jacques Attali, *Noise*

IS THE WORLD for seeing and believing, as Elvis Presley once put it, or for hearing, as Jacques Attali’s provocative statement alleges? Of course, a narrow choice between seeing and hearing is unnecessary, since our prevailing epistemological paradigm allows for a wide range of sensory information in determining what we think we know. Nevertheless, for most people, vision has enjoyed a privileged status in Western civilization since the Renaissance, if not before. In turn, this prejudice has relegated the other senses—including hearing—to a marginal role in our philosophical and literary pursuits.

This book contends, however, that soundscapes, music, noise, and silence all reveal to us something about prevailing worldviews, technologies, epistemologies, and aspirations past and present. For the most part, we agree with Attali when he asserts “our sight has dimmed,” but we’d like to phrase it differently: our hearing has dulled. Conversely, Attali implores us to listen and find ways to take more seriously the importance of sound as a social artifact. This seems particularly relevant at the moment, when we bear witness to a constant barrage of images, signs, and television and computer screens in our present neoliberal age, and hypercommodification rules the day with its proclivity for flash, glitter, and profit-driven spectacle. Perhaps our sight has not dimmed so much as become overstimulated. In any case, as historians, we find Attali’s charge that “we must learn to judge a society more by its sounds, by its art, and by its festivals, than by its statistics” compelling.¹

Much has happened, however, since Attali first published *Noise* in 1977. The dawning and initial flowering of our present digital age has provided the technological means for much positive innovation in the recording, mixing, and propagation of sound. At its most basic, sound requires a medium to transmit it. This medium is that of countless, elastic air particles that resonate once an initial energy force gives rise to the vibration we identify as a sound wave.² Once amplified, broadcast, and/or recorded, the study of sound then becomes inextricably tied to the study of media. It is precisely this realm that has undergone a complete transformation. With the advent of the Internet, sound has become associated with new forms of power, such as transnational production, and media has fostered faster, more individualistic, more globalized practices of consumption.

Yet, sound and listening, as well as the technologies and media that make them possible, are too easily taken for granted in our understanding of the present and the past. In fact, sound is produced in particular historical settings, supported by networks of power and money, and subject to contingency and contestation. In other words, it is not only cultural but also political. Who gets to make noise, who must remain silent, who is heard, and who is ignored? Who determines what counts as legitimate sound and what is rendered as mere noise? What particular voices and sounds are deemed important, proper, or appealing, and why are others deemed antisocial? These are distinctions that permeate our everyday lives today, just as they did in the past. By offering a sampling from a wide range of places and times, our intention in this book is to build upon

Attali's challenge in privileging sound as *a critical sense* in which to decipher issues of social and cultural change.

Of course, we are not alone in calling for a move away from the spectatory, visually dominant study of the past toward an expanded, full-sensory approach to history. Drawing inspiration from the notion of the soundscape—the sonic environment—as elaborated by R. Murray Schafer, scholars such as Alain Corbin and David Cressy studied the regulation of space and time through aural markers such as bells.³ Leigh Eric Schmidt, Richard Cullen Rath, and Mark Smith produced rich explorations of the soundscapes of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century United States arguing for the sonic dimensions of religion, nature, or slavery.⁴ Turning to the relationship between sound and technology, Jonathan Sterne and Emily Thompson attended to the origins of recorded sound and the engineering of acoustic environments, respectively, with compelling claims about the sound of modernity.⁵ Although this limited list focuses on North American soundscapes, sound studies spans the globe and includes scholars such as Charles Hirschkind, who has analyzed cassette sermons, listening practices, and affective spirituality in Egypt; Kevin Birth, who has listened to Carnival and politics in Trinidad; and Michael Veal, whose work has traced the social and technological origins of “dub” in Jamaica.⁶

Scholars of Latin America and the Caribbean have been particularly interested in electronic mass communications media of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, including radio, film, and television. The work of Reynaldo González, Inés Cornejo, Portugal Rubén Gallo, and Guillermo Mastrini, to name just a few, has inquired into the ways that technology and the infrastructure of communication shape everyday life and contribute to political outcomes.⁷ As Bryan McCann and Sergio Arribá have demonstrated, key political styles such as populism would not have been possible without the microphone or the radio.⁸ Moreover, scholars such as Oscar Luis López, Joy Hayes, and Robert Claxton have argued for the significance of the media to the constituted boundaries of nation.⁹

As historians of Latin America and the Caribbean, we find, despite these contributions, continuing silences in the relationship of sound to history.¹⁰ With this we ask: what are/have been the sounds of the region, and how can we understand them as embedded in and revealing of larger social and cultural meanings? One of the answers has almost become a cliché: Latin America and the Caribbean are known for their music, if nothing else. In some ways we know a great deal about sound in this part of the

world, as the histories of the tango, samba, bolero, son, mambo, and valenato have demonstrated the power of music to build identities and communities, to bring new value to the recently excoriated, to bring fame and wealth to select musicians, and to carve out spaces of specificity in an increasingly globalized commercial marketplace.¹¹

Nevertheless, music has practically drowned out other Latin American and Caribbean sounds. The chapters presented in this book move beyond music to soundscapes that resonate with countless commercial jingles and advertising slogans, to anthems and speeches rife with political propaganda, and to earsplitting fireworks explosions at local festivals. When the authors of these chapters do include music in their analysis, they are especially attentive to the broader contexts of record or broadcast production and the networks that ultimately disseminated them. This edited volume aims to decenter music in the study of Latin American and Caribbean sound, not by excluding it altogether but by including it as part of a multi-vocal sonic environment.

Moreover, many of the authors take on the challenge of reception—listening. Significantly, they heed the material nature of networks, taking into account unevenness and contingencies. Further, they acknowledge resistance to media hegemony upon reception and factor it into a more subtle interpretation of media discourses and practices. The work of Jesus Martín-Barbero is key here, as he suggests that it is precisely the mediating dynamic that ought not be overlooked in efforts to understand the power of mass communication and people's responses to it.¹² Listeners do not necessarily relinquish agency when they listen; they hear selectively. The contributions that follow take this as a point of departure in their precisely observed explorations of the aural.

Bringing together often disparate literatures, this edited volume puts the study of Latin America and the Caribbean in conversation, so to speak, with the study of sound and the media. Building on the convergence of fields, the contributors attend to the social and cultural meanings of sound and the practices of listening. This approach opens up new methodologies and extends the boundaries of scholarly inquiry. One of the main challenges in the study of sound is locating sources in which the traces of past sounds reside. This is an epistemological puzzle that requires a rethinking of our approach to sources.¹³ The contributors have read texts after the manner of conventional scholarship, but they have also sought to hear whatever they could in the documentation. Sometimes, this involved

reading texts for particular sounds. Sometimes, this involved listening to recordings, cautiously upstreaming from more contemporary ethnographic accounts. Moreover, the contributors have worked to glean what Roland Barthes has called “the grain of the voice” from these texts or recordings—not just the words spoken but also how they were spoken and by whom, not just who listened but also how they heard.¹⁴



The diverse range of sound cultures in Latin American and Caribbean history requires us to pay close attention to specific geographic, social, and technological configurations and distinctions across time and space. Approaching selected topics in the aural history of the region by way of a variety of different methods, the chapters in this collection divide along three main themes: appreciating the relationship of sound to writing and authorship, as well as considering the act of listening as a bodily/disembodied practice; assessing the critical relationships among media, technology, and politics; and understanding the process by which sounds create and contest identities and boundaries in public celebrations.

Part I: Embodied Sounds and the Sounds of Memory

Fernando de Sousa Rocha’s chapter “Recovering Voices: The Popular Music Ear in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Brazil” proposes that we examine listening to popular music in relation to oral and print cultures. In this, he analyzes the diverse conjunctions between orality and writing within different examples of Brazilian popular music. Among some of the questions he considers, de Sousa Rocha asks how listening is informed by notions of style or authorship and how—along the continuum between public and private spheres—listening helps to forge social distinctions.

Christine Ehrick’s “Radio Transvestism and the Gendered Soundscape in Buenos Aires, 1930s–1940s” considers early radio in the Río de la Plata as a site where gender, citizenship, and the public sphere were contested and reconstituted. Raising intriguing theoretical questions about the relationship between the voice and the body, Ehrick interrogates the idea that radio speech is “disembodied,” instead arguing that the human voice is inherently corporeal. Further, she charges that radio vocalizations represent a projection and performance of the body in an exclusively sonic way, which

in turn highlights the fact that the voice is critical in coding the body along presumed racial, class, and gendered lines. Together, the chapters in part I raise questions about the ways in which the sounds of voices are recorded and remembered and about the meanings such sounds take on in a range of contexts. They also open new methodological possibilities for studying relationships among bodies, technologies, and power.

Part II: The Media of Politics

Gisela Cramer's "How to Do Things with Waves: United States Radio and Latin America in the Times of the Good Neighbor" traces the relationship between the United States and Latin America during the late 1930s and early 1940s when broadcasting content changed markedly across the hemisphere. During the early years of World War II, Latin America gained a presence never before enjoyed on U.S. airwaves, and many programs rather explicitly sought to instill sympathy with and respect for the region's culture, history, and civilization. Rather than treating this episode simply as yet another facet of the Good Neighbor policy, Cramer carefully considers the workings of Good Neighbor Radio as a construction site for an *imagined community* on a larger, pan-American scale.

Alejandra Bronfman's "Weapons of the Geek: Romantic Narratives, Sonic Technologies, and Tinkerers in 1930s Santiago, Cuba" uses three different episodes to argue for the political significance of sonic technologies and of people with the knowledge to repair or maintain them. In each case, both repertoires of contention and strategies of surveillance depended on the ability to control the transmission of information with sound. This chapter also engages romantic narratives about the power of sound, inquiring as to the ways these narratives served as scripts for the actors involved. Bronfman suggests that the promise of freedom through sonic technologies became the premise for greater surveillance, once law enforcement realized that new capacities also meant new vulnerabilities.

Alejandro L. Madrid's "Music, Media Spectacle, and the Idea of Democracy: The Case of DJ Kermit's 'Góber'" follows the curious tale that originated with a Mexican media broadcast of a telephone conversation between Mario Marin, the governor of Puebla, and Kamel Nacif, an influential businessman linked to international child pornography and prostitution networks. The recording confirmed the complicity of the governor

in kidnapping and trying to illegally imprison Lydia Cacho, the journalist who had publicly revealed Nacif's connections to child pornography. The broadcast of the conversation ignited a media frenzy that revealed the practices of corruption, misogyny, and censorship prevalent in the Mexican political system, but it also put in evidence the media's commodification of ideas such as democracy and freedom in an attempt to increase ratings. The attention to sonic media and its explicit relationship to political strategies in each of these chapters offer new ways to explore politics and technology in Latin America.

Part III: The Sonics of Public Spaces

Gonzalo Araoz's "Alba: Musical Temporality in the Carnival of Oruro, Bolivia" asserts that rhythm and memory are highly relevant concepts to explain the complex phenomenon of temporal perception in relation to the celebration of Carnival in the Bolivian city of Oruro. Araoz focuses on the cacophonous performance of the Alba rite in the Oruro Carnival, where dozens of brass bands perform different Morenada tunes simultaneously, giving rise to a peculiar sense of time and memory of time. Araoz argues that the sonic chaos of the Alba rite demands an approach that considers both musical and temporal dimensions and points to the relevance of the philosopher of music Victor Zuckerkandl. According to Zuckerkandl the feeling of rhythm is the experience (or even the cognition) of time itself. This is crucial to understanding temporal perception during the Alba rite in Oruro, when the notions of pause, repetition, time, and memory are often musically blurred together.

Andrew Grant Wood's "Such a Noise! Fireworks and the Soundscapes of Two Veracruz Festivals" compares the use of fireworks during two annual public celebrations in the Mexican state of Veracruz: Carnival in the modern, industrial port of Veracruz and Candelaria in the river town of Tlacotalpan. Tracing the historical deployment of fireworks in Veracruz, Wood notes how pyrotechnics have long been used to mark festival time and space. Observing the acoustic history of each of these undertakings with a special interest in fireworks, he then examines how fireworks play an essential role in the process of community self-identification, promotion, and life-affirming reflection. These two noisy contributions are a fitting ending to this book, which aims to remind readers to pay attention

to the din and clatter of the Latin American past and present. And finally, Michele Hilmes's generous postscript indicates future possibilities for our collective endeavors.



If, given the technological capacities of computer software and cinematic special effects, seeing is no longer believing, perhaps one can say that the same is also true of sound. Torn from the context of its production and reverberating through time and space, sound can persuade or deceive as easily as visual images. Nevertheless, this does not mean that sound should not or cannot be studied. Indeed, as many of the chapters in this book suggest, what is interesting is precisely the processes by which sound is generated, duplicated, amplified, altered, and propagated. If we are subject to an abundance of images, so too are we subject to a multiplicity of sounds—voices, machines, animals, and the landscape itself all make noise—that merit attention. Our continued epistemological overreliance on the spectatory in researching and writing about the past puts us at risk. If sight remains the primary sense by which we constitute and represent our scholarship, then we have marginalized much that is relevant to other sense records potentially rich in information and cultural clues. Sound (both natural and mediated) offers us much in the way of content. It can inform us about historical qualities related to time and space. In human terms, it has the ability to reveal personal emotions, moods, and messages. Sound, in other words, is rich in potential meaning if we are willing to listen.

This is a call for new histories of Latin America and the Caribbean significantly informed by sound but also, ultimately, by *all possible senses* and not just those exclusively rooted in sight and text-based documentation. What follows is by no means a comprehensive collection of “sound histories” but a pioneering aural source sampling. In this, we hope to encourage further explorations and experimentations leading, perhaps, to a methodological renaissance of sorts—one that rejoins the sensory with the epistemological in thinking about the past.