

# Forum Introduction: Listening for History

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Scholars of Latin America have long been concerned with sound. Or have they? Music, certainly, has been an object of study, and given its ubiquity and importance in many parts of Latin America and the Caribbean, that is not surprising.<sup>1</sup> New generations of scholars have joined distinguished traditions of critical analysis of genres, lyrics, and musicians and their relationships to nations and cultures.<sup>2</sup> Music has affective, political, and economic dimensions, and those have received nuanced attention. At the same time, Latin America can often be fetishized through music, both in and outside the region. More than perhaps we realize, the neocolonial gaze on Latin America has long had a strong aural component. Stereotypes of Latin Americans as exotic, passionate, and irrational resonate through the sounds of Brazilian carnival music, the gunfire of the Mexican drug wars, or even the sounds and rhythms of Spanish-speaking populations in the United States. In popular culture, nations and national musics are all too easily reified, as the tango or the Buena Vista Social Club comes to stand for and override complex cultural processes and interactions.

We want to use this forum to build on and open up critical conversations deploying sound as a principal category of analysis. What does that mean? First, the pieces in this forum craft narratives out of sonic sources in addition to written texts. Second, and most important, the authors investigate sound itself—that is, they listen to it and are attentive to the media that deliver it to our ears (and many ears in the past). In addition to music, the spoken word as well as the processes and infrastructures that produce sonic archives command our attention here. Sound is a useful category to think with. Colonialism, decolonization, migration, and the production of racial and sexual difference, the essays as a whole argue, take on new tones and registers when we listen to them.

1. The literature on music in Latin America and the Caribbean is too extensive to list in its entirety. Some pioneers of the twentieth-century study of music include Vianna, *Mystery*; Carpentier, *Music*.

2. Vazquez, *Listening*; Veal, *Dub*; Averill, *Day*; Bigenho, *Sounding Indigenous*; Fernández l'Hoeste and Vila, *Cumbia!*; Madrid and Moore, *Danzón*; Moore, *Music*; Wade, *Music*; McCann, *Hello*; Zolov, *Refried Elvis*; Hertzman, *Making Samba*; Dunn, *Brutality Garden*.

We also imagine this forum as a conversation with the prolific field of sound studies. That field has opened many modes of inquiry, too many to adequately summarize here. Indeed, it may be overly rigid to define the multivocal considerations of sound in various iterations as a field. Sound studies encompasses (but is not limited to) a multidisciplinary series of pursuits on soundscapes, histories of sound, the sounds of history, the ontological and epistemological status of the aural, and its relationships to science, environment, art, and the body, among other things.<sup>3</sup> Sound studies offers a new paradigm for approaching and analyzing the past, but with important exceptions, it has remained within the geographical parameters of North America and Europe.<sup>4</sup> Actively bridging that gap, these forum pieces offer varied examples of how to do (Latin American) history with sound.

We assembled the texts as more of a conversation than a series of stand-alone pieces. Everyone read, listened, and commented on the others' pieces if they chose to. In order to extend the conversation, we invited commentaries on the forum, which can be read at <http://hahr-online.com/sound-forum>; we also invite readers to visit and add their own comments about the forum to the discussion. We are graced with the contributions of three leading scholars in the field of sound but not necessarily in the field of Latin American history: a Latin Americanist who is a music theorist and musician, and two prominent sound studies scholars. In addition, one of our contributors, Gala Porras-Kim, is a working artist and musician. We were intrigued by the possibilities raised by her provocative piece and by its frankly unconventional (from the perspective of the conventions of history) approach as well as by the ways that it suggests alternative ways to present history.

So what does emerge when sound studies and Latin American history reach across academic boundaries? We understand this as an opening gesture rather than a definitive statement. The short articles presented here are meant to prompt and provoke rather than proclaim. They offer new ways to think about the body, urban space, memory, the production of knowledge, and modes of resistance. With regard to sound studies, postcolonial perspectives require distinct considerations of power and difference. When Christine Ehrick and

3. Sterne, *Audible Past*; Thompson, *Soundscape*; Kahn, *Noise*; Smith, *Listening*; Lacey, *Listening Publics*; Weheliye, *Phonographies*; Cavarero, *For More than One Voice*; Miller, *Segregating Sound*; Dolar, *Voice*; Feld, *Sound*; Birdsall, *Nazi Soundscapes*; Birdsall and Enns, *Sonic Mediations*; Erlmann, *Reason*.

4. Hilmes, "Is There a Field." Some exceptions include Hirschkind, *Ethical Soundscape*; Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality*; Larkin, *Signal*; Brathwaite, *History*; Meintjes, *Sound*.

Elizabeth Dore listen carefully to accent, intonation, and silences in comedic sketches and in oral interviews, respectively, they argue that voice is not just incidental to racialized or gendered bodies; it actively constructs them as such. Alejandra Bronfman and Gala Porrás-Kim take on the traces of voices and instruments in ethnographic recordings, arguing that they must be understood as the foundations of archives of blackness and indigeneity in the Americas. And Marc Hertzman importantly reminds us not to fetishize sonic sources but rather to place them alongside other sources that enable new analytic perspectives on music as labor and on the complex histories of music as property. New media technologies allow (online) readers to also listen to some of the audio discussed by the authors, granting direct access to these rich sonic sources in ways not possible in an age of print-only media. These studies don't just add a sound track to histories that we already know; they use sound to deepen our understanding of particular political and cultural moments. At the same time, they stretch our assumptions about what it means to do history. What does sound studies have to contribute to Latin American history, and what does Latin American history promise to contribute to sound studies? These questions are posed in various ways throughout this forum, if not completely answered. We have only just begun to listen.

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