# Editors' Introduction

## Sound Politics: Critically Listening to the Past

At the core of any attempt to write the history of sound, we inevitably confront a cacophony of political meanings. Military and political authorities have historically mobilized sonic techniques and technologies in aggressive and violent confrontations with perceived enemies and foreign threats. Musicians, singers, activists, youth groups, and demonstrators have expressed dissent, created solidarities, and manifested opposition and resistance not only in words but in sonic expressions that complement, amplify, and ultimately exceed discursive modes of communication. Meanwhile, the state has expanded its claims to regulate and discipline sound and noise in the name of public health, social order, and communal welfare.

Evocations of sound, as well, shape in part how we evaluate social order or disorder. Peace, for example, might denote tranquility, which in turn implies silence—an absence, perhaps, of the noise of combat or the angry voices of protest, as in "peace and quiet." In addition, peace can be understood as public harmony, the well-synchronized notes of a metaphorical social melody. Discord, by contrast, can suggest both jarring music and social disorder. Disparate groups and historical actors often describe the same set of sounds in a range of opposing ways, as noisy or harmonic, discordant or melodic, bestial or human, familiar or foreign, legible or unintelligible. Such labels participate in the invisible, ideological workings of social discipline by imposing order and hierarchy onto both what and how we hear. And here, the politics of sound are not limited to the audible; silence (and the ability of a teacher, drill sergeant, ship captain, or judge to demand it) can also have politically repressive or culturally homogenizing effects. Yet even in spite of the coercive potential of silence, its ambivalent potential can be seen when political activists and organizers mobilize moments of silence as powerful acts of memory, recogni-

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tion, and critical reflection. Indeed, sound and its modulations give shape and form to progressive political organizing and activism, forging relationships and inspiring collective action across spatial boundaries. The chanted religious hymn, the marching song, and the shouted slogan all represent sonic interventions that can perform cohesion and produce unity. Aside from expressive and communicative content, the very form of sound itself can be transgressive, since it can breach barricades, blockades, and borders.

Sound's ambiguity and indeterminacy reside in part in the differing particular contexts of listeners. The raucous noise of a political march can be, for participants, inspiring and empowering. For its critics, it might be savage, wild, or threatening. But while how we listen and what we hear may vary based on differences of social position or political persuasion, those differences are also constituted by and within the soundscape. For example, labeling certain sounds—a drum circle in Harlem or call to prayers from a Leipzig mosque—as noise or particular neighborhoods as noisy often serves as an implicit or explicit signifier of distinctions based on race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or class.[1] Indeed, sound can act as a sensual and visceral marker of such distinctions. In turn, noise-abatement campaigns, whether driven informally within a community or formally by the state, produce and reinforce hierarchies of inclusion and exclusion, power and privilege. So, too, can sound, in the form of sound cannons or sirens, be deployed violently to maintain order, to police, to punish and torture.

This recognition of the politics of sound, silence, and hearing has generated new questions in the emerging academic field of "sound studies." Sound studies, as part of a larger historical and anthropological reevaluation of the sensory, has expanded in recent decades as a method for understanding historical actors' and groups' subjective engagements with their surroundings. Thus, Richard Rath, in a groundbreaking examination of the sounds of early America, considered the ways ordinary people listened across cultures to each other and to their environments. He urges scholars to consider how past societies imbued the audial with as much meaning and power as the visual. Mark Smith, similarly, approaches sound studies as a diagnostic of power, dissent, resistance, and authority.[2] As the work of Rath and Smith demonstrates, the most innovative work in historical sound studies has focused less on reconstructing a fuller, more empirically authentic version of past experience, than in offering a more capacious understanding of the operations of power on the ways that historical actors mediated their experiences, including their sense perceptions. Such an insight, held also by the authors in this issue, allows us to consider sound as part of the larger sensorium—a soundscape—but also as something interpreted, negotiated, defined, disputed, and disciplined.

Listening to the historical soundscape with an ear to power requires a critical mode of quotidian social analysis.[3] Historians and sensory studies scholars have begun to develop methodologies to think critically about sound in the past, as some-

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thing related to but distinct from music and musicology and as something comprehensible and legible even in archival sources created long before the advent of sound-recording equipment. This special issue considers the historically contested politics of sound, especially the ways that sound blurs boundaries between dissent and discipline, mediates the relationship between resistance and power, reinforces distinctions, but also challenges hierarchies. Sound, in these essays, operates simultaneously as something *materially produced* within social and technological relations and something *interpreted and imagined*, especially by social and political elites, but also by those excluded from privilege or subjected to authority.

Methodologically, most of the contributors to this volume examine the question of voice, not simply as words uttered but instead as sounds shaped, heard, evaluated, and then transcribed in a variety of sources as diverse as court records, parliamentary proceedings, travel narratives, and newspaper editorials. By analyzing voices and utterances for their sonic meanings, the essays here offer insight into how historical actors both enunciated and heard the aural markers of class, gender, and racial difference. They also reveal how sound articulated and demarcated social space, whether in cities, aboard ships, in courtrooms, or in the sites between street and home, the public and the private.[4]

One strength of the ensemble of articles presented in this issue of *RHR* is their broad historical span, covering medieval to modern soundscapes. Some of the most significant historical work in sound studies has analyzed sound and its reproduction, amplification, and/or regulation from postindustrial to digital modernity, whether Emily Thompsons's *The Soundscape of Modernity* or Jonathan Sterne's *MP3: The Meaning of a Format.*[5] Radio, television, and film studies have also been sites of important scholarly "buzz" around the theme of sound, offering empirical and theoretical analyses embedded within modern forms of technology and subjectivity.[6] Charles Hirschkind has complicated our thinking about the relationship between modernity and religion by examining sermons recorded and distributed on cassette tapes in the Middle East.[7] But many scholars who seek traces of soundscapes solely from printed materials written in the period prior to the electrification of sound and the invention of sound reproduction and transmission technologies have also called for more critical work on the history of sound, noise, listening, and hearing.[8] It is precisely because sound studies entails more than simply the privilege of "hearing" in its purely physiological sense that histories of sound must extend backward in time, however fraught our attempts to recover soundscapes from ancient, medieval, or early modern sources might be.

The broad chronological range of the essays in this issue, before and after the advent of the mechanical reproduction of sound, permits both a methodological and historical evaluation of sound and its social and technological (re)production. Do phonographs, tape recorders, and now sophisticated digital technologies markedly divide modernity from premodernity? Perhaps the analog and digital recording of

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sound has diminished the ability of literate elites to transcribe subaltern voices in ways that ultimately render those voices distorted or diminished, muffled, or mute. Equally, the ability to reproduce and broadcast sounds across space and to preserve them across time presents new political opportunities, as the history of community radio demonstrates.[9] Yet the age of mechanical reproduction might also represent a chimera of objectivity, in which the sonic recording and transmission of a speech, a rally, or a wartime battle is heard as unmediated "fact" in the way that the photograph often hides its own techniques of framing the visual image and masks polysemous interpretations behind a veneer of technologically authorized truth. Does the meaning of sound change when it can be listened to over and over again, when it can be acousmatically divided from its original source, or when it can be amplified over and above its original volume? Methodologically, how should historians evaluate the subjective interpretation of sound when it can be reproduced beyond its momentary and fleeting wavelengths? How should we listen to (and analyze) such sonic sources differently from those sounds that rest primarily in written accounts? Perhaps by first critically questioning the authenticity of electrified analog or digital soundscapes and recognizing that the source base they leave behind for the historian requires careful interpretive mediation can the historian then return to other sources of sonic mediation in textual forms from eras before the late nineteenth century.

We have organized the articles in this issue in three sections. In the first, "Hearing the History of Political Protest," Michael Sizer looks at "murmur" and "clamor" as well as the bell or tocsin in the sonic landscape of medieval revolt in France, Flanders, and England as part of a vibrant oral popular political culture that challenged the dominance of elite authorities and structures of power in the Middle Ages. While Sizer recovers this popular soundscape of medieval protest, he is also sensitive to the fact that his sources, written by the elites themselves to document their own interests, must be read as sonic transcriptions, which often aimed ex post facto to discipline the noisy crowd. Lilian Radovac traces how the emerging technology of the PA system provided both opportunities for amplified crowd protest and challenges to state control in New York during the 1930s. In her case, Fiorello LaGuardia's policies policing public speech created a "liberal speech regime" that spatially contained the threat of an amplified orality in the city. Roshanak Kheshti traces how rooftop chanting in Iran both in 1979 and 2009 enacts a counter-politics of sonic performativity. While Sizer and Radovac emphasize the sound of protest in various public spaces, Kheshti reveals how sound's transgressive capacity to move between and beyond specific places creates an alternative space, neither fully public, nor fully private, from which dissent could be articulated. In the process of destabilizing the sharp distinction between public and private, these rooftop chants also made possible the reimagining of gender binaries, as well as the binaries of citizens versus state and the religious versus the secular.

The second section, "Articulating Identity, Hierarchy, and Power," offers

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three examples of how historians can treat voice and speech as sonic artifacts as well as vectors of linguistic communication. For example, Hillary Taylor examines the role of stammering in early modern English courtroom testimonies as a complex and ambivalent site where plebian inarticulacy was both performed and countered. Johan Heinsen turns to the soundscape of the colonial ship as a site of classed speech, where officers demeaned lower-class maritime worker speech as inarticulate noise. Josephine Hoegaerts examines parliamentary speech and oratory to demonstrate how an emergent oral performance culture was refracted by hardening social expectations and distinctions, rooted in relations of class and gender as well as in symbolically coded differences such as the opposition between the rational human and the irrational beast, the artificial and the natural.

While several of the articles described above take on the topic of noise, the two contributions to the third section, "Politicizing Sound and Noise," nicely distill in quite different contexts the power of noise as both a label imposed upon the soundscape and as a material sonic form with deep cultural implications for urban life and politics. Jennifer Stoever examines the ambiguous meaning of noise by relating how postwar New York's black community adjusted its own community standards while simultaneously engaging with the soundscapes of recent Latin American and Caribbean immigrants in Harlem during the immediate postwar period. David Suisman looks at how the US government's 1964 experiments with the effects of sonic booms on Oklahoma City residents initiated a "technopolitics" of sound with lasting repercussions for everyday life and in the military use of sound.

In addition, this volume includes two shorter pieces. The first, an Intervention by Nicholas Terpstra, tracks the shifts in regulation and prosecution of prostitution in Renaissance Florence to illuminate shifts in the signs, sounds, spatial distribution, and politics of sex and the sacred. The volume concludes with Catherine Baker's essay for "Teaching Radical History," in which she traces the genealogy of her course on the politics of music, illustrating some of the insights offered and problems encountered in using music as a form of sound in the digital era.

—Daniel Bender, Duane J. Corpis, and Daniel J. Walkowitz

## Notes

1. Margot Adler, "Drumming Up a Protest in a Harlem Park," National Public Radio's *Weekend Edition Sunday*, September 2, 2007, www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=14124206 (accessed August 4, 2014); Ferda Ataman, "Minarett-Lautsprecher: Ist der Ruf erst installiert. Sie galt als Beweis für friedliches Miteinander—bis ihre Gemeinde Lautsprecher am Minarett anbrachte. Wie um die Moschee im kleinen Rendsburg ein großer Glaubenskrieg entbrannte" ("Minaret Loudspeakers: Once a Reputation is Built: It [the mosque] was viewed as proof for peaceful coexistence, until its community attached loudspeakers on its minaret; How a big religious war broke out around the mosque in the small town of Rensburg,") *Der Tagesspiegel*, August 7, 2010, www.tagesspiegel.de (accessed August 4, 2014).
2. Richard C. Rath, *How Early America Sounded* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press,

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2005); Mark M. Smith, *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); *How Race Is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2006); *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2000).

3. R. M. Schaffer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1994).

4. The spatiality of sound has been the subject of several mapping websites that will be of interest to our readers. Emily Thompson has generated an interactive and comprehensive site mapping noise complaints in 1920s New York City called "The Roaring Twenties," vectorsdev.usc.edu/NYCsound/777b.html (accessed July 4, 2014). Melissa Kagen has mapped musical performances in the Auschwitz concentration camps, both formal performances permitted and even coerced by camp officials and hidden performances in defiance of official prohibitions, www.melissakagen.com/music_at_auschwitz (accessed July 4, 2014). Finally, Ben Markham, Matt Azevedo, and Joshua Stephens collaborated to produce the "Virtual Paul's Cross Project," an acoustic modeling of John Donne's 1622 gunpowder sermon based on sophisticated digital reconstructions of architectural acoustics, and which claims to imagine the overall soundscape of background noises that Donne's audience may have heard or even helped produce, vpcp.chass.ncsu.edu (accessed July 4, 2014).

5. Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900-1913* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004); Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012). See also Sterne's earlier influential book, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), which artfully bridges the gap between the period before and after analog sound transmission, reproduction, and recording, as does John M. Picker's *Victorian Soundscapes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

6. Jay Beck and Tony Grajeda, eds., *Lowering the Boom: Critical Studies in Film and Sound* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008); James Lastra, *Sound Technology and the American Cinema: Perception, Representation, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Charles O'Brien, *Cinema's Conversion to Sound: Technology and Film Style in France and the U.S.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); Richard Abel and Rick Altman, eds., *The Sounds of Early Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); Rick Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Susan J. Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Liz Gunner, Dina Ligaga, and Dumisani Mo, eds., *Radio in Africa: Publics, Cultures, Communities* (Woodbridge, UK: James Currey, 2012); Bridget Griffen-Foley, *Changing Stations: The Story of Australian Commercial Radio* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2009); Christina Dunbar-Hester, *Low Power to the People: Pirate, Protest, and Politics in FM Radio Activism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014); Louis Niebur, *Special Sound: The Creation and Legacy of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Michelle Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Jason Loviglio, *Radio's Intimate Public: Network Broadcasting and Mass-Mediated Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005). The field of technology studies has been fruitfully combined with sound studies in works such as Karin Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound: Technology, Culture, and Public Problems of Noise in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008) and Trevor Pinch and Frank

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Trocco, *Analog Days: The Invention and Impact of the Moog Synthesizer* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004). Two important theoretical contributors to sound and media studies are Michel Chion and Friedrich A. Kittler. See Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University, 1994); Chion, *The Voice in Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Chion, *Film, a Sound Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

7. Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). See also W. Armbrust, "Audiovisual Media and History of the Middle East," in *History and Historiographies of the Modern Middle East*, ed. A. Singer and I. Gershoni (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 288–312.
8. Alain Corbin's *Village Bells: The Culture of the Senses in the Nineteenth-Century French Countryside* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) and James Johnson's *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) were two of the earliest scholarly works to consider the history of the soundscape before (and in a sense outside) the industrial and technological transformations of the "modernized" soundscape. Others have pushed back even further in time. A few important contributions include Emily Cockayne, *Hubbub: Filth, Noise, and Stench in England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008); Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); David Garrioch, "Sounds of the City: The Soundscape of Early Modern European Towns," *Urban History* 30, no. 1 (2003): 5–25; Miguel Angel Marin, "Sound and Urban Life in a Small Spanish Town during the *ancien régime*," *Urban History* 29, no. 1 (2002): 49–59; Bruce R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
9. See, for example, forthcoming work by Mary Roldan on community radio in Colombia. Recent publications include Vinod Pavarala and Kanchan K. Malik, *Other Voices: The Struggle for Community Radio in India* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007).

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