

The Endless Circuits of Global Music

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The possibilities for connecting the musics of the world to assumptions about cultural identity were amplified significantly with the advent of recorded sound in the late nineteenth century, a period contemporaneous with extensive imperialist projects undertaken by Euro-American powers. The ensuing phonographic era provided an increasingly accessible soundtrack to the shift from colonialism and empire to a period of more general globalisation.

The role of global musics in constituting regional, national, racial, sexual and other identities in the phonographic era has become an area of growing scholarly interest, with important recent books including Michael Denning's study of the global recording boom of the 1920s and 1930s, Roshanak Kheshti's analysis of race and gender in the world music industry and the innovative collection of texts on "seismographic sounds" published by the Norient network. *Audible Empire*, a collection of sixteen wide-ranging essays combining "music, global politics [and] critique," adds to this literature through engaging studies of Mexican *sonideros*, Cuban hip hop, field recordings from Mozambique, jazz in interwar Shanghai, tango in contemporary Buenos Aires and much more. The essays are written from a variety of intersectional perspectives that emphasise historicity, hybridity, flows, channels, interstices and unexpected details: the role of cigarettes in the Chinese jazz scene of the 1930s; the use of dub poetry in 1990s to narrate the end of the cold war; the recasting of music-making as "exemplary labour" in South Africa; the politics of protecting music as "intangible heritage" in Argentina.

As described in an informative introduction by editors Ronald Radano and Tejumola Olaniyan (both professors at the University of Wisconsin, Madison), the imposition of Euro-western tonality played a vital role in the project of colonialism. Sound which fell outside the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic norms of the colonisers was typically cast as noise or sonic barbarity, further proof of the need for civilising force. This historical notion can be (and is, in this book) traced though to our present society, for sound, as an excessive and ultimately uncontainable force, has the ability to

continually fill, create or otherwise colonise new spaces. Audible empires of various sizes and structures surround us on a daily basis and we are made regularly aware of the ways in which noise can disrupt, disturb or comfort. By bringing together insights from ethnomusicology and contemporary sound studies, while keeping an ear open to history, *Audible Empire* mixes nation-defining colonial projects with an understanding of sound as a border-crossing entity caught up in, and sometimes foretelling, processes of everyday globalisation.

There is much to savour at length in this collection; here I focus on the essays that I found particularly engaging. Following Michael Denning's essay on the decolonisation of the ear through recorded music (an argument with which I felt familiar through its more extensive discussion in the author's *Noise Uprising*), I was drawn to Nan Enstad's fascinating text on jazz and cigarette smoking in interwar Shanghai. By bringing these aspects together in her essay, Enstad is able to succinctly unpack the relationship between multinational corporations (the tobacco and culture industries), the semiotics of popular culture (cigarettes, sartorial style, jazz music) and the processes by which music creates spaces for illicit pleasures—dancing and sharing cigarettes, in this case—allowing for moments of imperial intimacy.

Andrew Jones's essay on "circuit listening," which unfolds around a case study of 1960s Hong Kong pop diva Grace Chang, makes a strong case for music scenes as both historically specific and overlapping. Discussing the ways in which Chang was able to appropriate foreign musical styles, Jones writes, "Globally circulating genres such as mambo and calypso... are musical vernaculars, emerging from particular (and often marginalized) cultural circuits, and they serve as a common language between an imperial dominant and local particulars" (78). What I found revelatory in this essay was the sense of the circuit covering so many different places, with no clear origin or destination, just the seemingly endless circuitry of music genres and global flows. To be cosmopolitan, then as now, was to be aware of these flows and to find ways to join and extend the circuit, through cultural appropriation if need be.

Elsewhere the circuits being emphasised are those producing an international network of resistance. Marc Perry writes of "circuits of solidarity" that have long connected African American and Cuban revolutionary campaigns (217), as personified in figures such as Assata Shakur, a Black Panther wanted by the authorities in the U.S. and granted asylum in Cuba (and given hip hop credence as godmother to Tupac Shakur). The need for solidarity in the face of discrimination comes to the fore in Nitasha Sharma's essay on what she terms "post-9/11 Brown," a lumping-together of culturally diverse groups in the wake of kneejerk reactions to Middle Eastern, West Asian and South Asian foreignness in twenty-first century America. The gradual conflation of these groups has led to a situation in which post-9/11

Brown subjects cross-identify and, in the musical field, often do so via the longstanding tools and techniques of hip hop's Black American grammar. The cultural, ethnic and religious conflation of these subjects serves as both an object of critique and a platform of strategic (self-)essentialism among the performers Sharma discusses. So too are U.S.-based media platforms such as Google, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter seen by younger musicians and activists as simultaneously objects of imperialism and platforms for self-expression and communal mobilisation. Facebook, in the words of rapper Chee Malabar, "has more information about people than the FBI or CIA" (307), but it has also worked to bring otherwise isolated groups into conversation with each other.

Such observations tally with those made by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in discussing globalisation as both threat and opportunity, and I was often surprised, when reading *Audible Empire*, not to find more reference to Hardt and Negri's work. Only Gavin Steingo makes explicit use of their book *Empire* in his discussion of South African *kwaito*. While it's by no means compulsory to subscribe to Hardt and Negri's take on *Empire* (which they capitalise in order to demarcate it as a newly understood concept based on a "monarchical" order of dominant international organisations), it has shaped a substantial amount of debate on the subject in the new millennium and might have warranted more discussion than it receives here. Radano and Olaniyan do state early on, however, that they wish to move away from what they interpret (unconvincingly, in my view) as a "neoliberal turn" in contemporary sound studies and to do so via a return to the historicity of local, material examples with seemingly clear root and branch manifestations. Perhaps the notion of *Empire* as a more rhizomatic, placeless entity conflicts too much with these aims. This would be fair enough, except that the editors also claim the same aims and objectives for the other contributors to the volume and I'm not so sure that all the essayists here are so antithetical to the notion of a post-material *Empire*.

As is perhaps inevitable with a set of texts so caught up in notions of flow, migration and hybridity, there is space for the deployment of many provocative metaphors. Josh Kun, who explores the migrational aspects of music cultures via the example of Mexican *sonideros*, uses the crossfade as a metaphor for border crossing: "The art of the crossfader is not only moving between two worlds but also moving between them seamlessly and strategically, finding common beats, tempos, melodic moments — points of convergence that allow new mixes to be born. Crossfading mixes while preserving difference, and it slides between worlds without fully erasing one in the pursuit of another" (102). Meanwhile Micol Seigel, reflecting on the unfortunate career of Brazilian musician Elsie Houston, writes that, "Music from somewhere else offers a Rorschach blot of the highest order" (120). Her point is about interpretation, and she notes that music can be used as evidence for more or less anything one might

wish to argue. Against such tendencies, Seigel places the necessity to consider historical and social contexts and the fields of possibility that mark the hard lines of difference between music and musicians and their places and times. Brent Hayes Edwards sounds a relative note when discussing the African fieldwork undertaken by Hugh Tracey in the 1940s. Citing the critique of Tracey produced by Leroy Vail and Landeg White four decades later, Hayes Edwards writes of a “counterarchival” approach that can be launched against the cultural misunderstandings of the past, based as they inevitably were on particular historical, imperial and prejudicial (or at least essentialist) positions. But the intent here is not just to blast the blunders and shortcomings of past perspectives but “to ask whether an archive devoted to the sedimentation of the ‘traditional’ can be used or abused to trace a history of transformation” (272). Is it possible, Hayes Edwards wonders, “to excavate from Tracey’s archive of African music a counterarchive of anticolonialism in sound?” (272). More than a Rorschach blot, then, the trace left by the music from spatial and temporal elsewhere may continue to inform as much as reflect.

Missing from some of the essays is an extensive discussion of sound itself, with the audibility of Empire sometimes being left as an implicit rather than explicit presence in the narratives. I found myself thirsting, for example, for knowledge of how the sonic textures of Chee Malabar’s music might underline, extend or even contradict his powerful lyrics. The Internet can, of course, help to quench this thirst but it would still be useful to hear how these essayists hear the sound of Empire in the music they discuss. It is perhaps fitting, then, that the collection concludes with Kofi Agawu’s description of the “musical violence” done to African subjects during the colonial era through the imposition of Western European tonality by missionaries and other “educators”. Protestant hymns, Agawu argues, would “keep Africans trapped in a prisonhouse of diatonic tonality” from which the sonic language of the continent has struggled to escape (337-8). Agawu locates the traces of this tonality in a series of examples drawn from popular and art music, searching for moments where an active rather than passive hybridity can be discerned; not in South Africa’s Ladysmith Black Mambazo or Ghana’s Peace Brass Band, apparently, but perhaps in Nigerian composer Joshua Uzoigwe and Ga highlife band Wulomei. That Agawu’s analysis draws on a musical grammar developed to accommodate European art music is an issue that is not discussed, however.

At any given point in the phonographic era, we can find configurations of musical style, lyric, language, performance technique or dissemination method that will tell us something about the nature of contemporary Empire. This is a story which emerges again and again from these essays, but that doesn’t make the story repetitive, tiring or boring; rather, the enjoyment is in the detail, the variation, the subtle shading of the standard experience. Reading about tango’s journey towards UNESCO

recognition as intangible heritage, I was struck by many parallels with Portuguese fado, a musical world and cultural context with which I have more familiarity. This in turn recalled for me the studies of fado I discovered in Buenos Aires book shops (including at least one comparative study of fado and tango) and how that discovery once again challenged the way I've tended to consider global cultural networks from a UK perspective.

What becomes evident from *Audible Empire* is the extent to which any group of people can be any other group of people's exotic and/or feared others. This may recall Arjun Appadurai's call to resituate globalisation theory away from still dominant "West and the Rest" perspectives, an ambition which seems central to many of the contributors to this collection. If it remains questionable to what extent such a goal can be achieved when we are only provided, as in this book, with narratives emanating from U.S. academic institutes, at least those narratives invite us to consider numerous intersectional perspectives. At its best, *Audible Empire* helps to displace common tropes of imperialist debate and encourages its readers to listen to the soundtrack of Empire's past and present with refreshed ears.

Works cited

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