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## DOSSIER: Words and Rhythm, Sound and Text

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From poetic meter to talking drums and the presumed communicative function of music, words and rhythm are commonly entangled.<sup>1</sup> The interface between sound and text is perhaps less intuitive. Sound is a sinusoidal pressure wave of cyclic oscillations between impulses and rests, presences and absences, which is transduced by the ear into mechanical vibrations and, eventually, electrical signals to the brain (Wisnik 17–18).<sup>2</sup> Text comes from the Latin *textus*, referring to something woven or textured, often used in relation to the Scriptures: the written record of an idealized, originary voice.<sup>3</sup> It is certainly possible to “write” sound. Audio recording began not with “reproduction” (which was introduced later with Edison’s phonograph), but rather with the goal inscribing sound on paper (*phonautography*), as a waveform graph of time versus amplitude (Feaster 142–43). Phonetic alphabets also write sound, albeit symbolically instead of indexically. But how can text *sound* on its own? Is not any discussion of text as sound or sound as text “purely figurative” (W. J. T. Mitchell 158)? How can we “linger in the cut between word and sound, between meaning and content,” to explore modes of “writing out of sound” (Moten 175–80)?

The articles in this dossier listen for new encounters between rhythm and words, sound and text through engagement with bodies (Campbell, Carter), resonance (Fleites Lear, Kassavin, Plevka-Jones), intermediality (Vergara C.), voice (Milone, Díaz Frene, Piazza), and artistic-ethnographic practice (Velarde). The authors draw on ethnography, musicology, philosophy, critical theory, media history, and literary analysis to explore objects as diverse as drums, *declamadoras*, poems, novels, fictions, epistolary phonographs, and urban waterways. All authors respond, in varying ways, to the question of how attuning to the sonic resonances of text and the rhythmic oscillations of words in Latin America can question colonial/modern epistemes and strategies of reading and interpretation.

In their edited volume *Remapping Sound Studies*, Gavin Steingo and Jim Sykes call for a critical revision and expansion of sound studies outside the Global North, where the field predominantly took shape following the turn of the millennium (“Introduction”). The so-called “sonic turn” has been traced to texts such as Emily Thompson’s *The Soundscape of Modernity* (2002) and Jonathan Sterne’s *The Audible Past* (2003) (McEnaney, “Sonic Turn” 84). By approaching the development of technologies of sound recording and reproduction, Thompson and Sterne generalized sound as

an object of study and historicized practices of listening. One of Sterne’s insights was “audile technique”: focused, intentional listening practices with the objective of rationalizing what was heard. Crucially, historical shifts in “regimes of listening” did not merely respond to or make legible sonic stimuli (Szendy 8). Instead, listening practices “defined the object: listening made sound” (McEnaney, “Sonic Turn” 87).

Sound acquired particular significance in Latin America and the Caribbean, not only because countries such as Haiti, Cuba, Jamaica, and Argentina were pioneers in the global expansion of radio technology (Bronfman; McEnaney, *Acoustic Properties*). As in other Global South contexts, “native” peoples were understood as the Others of Western reason and the visual logic of the North (Steingo and Sykes, “Introduction” 2), hence associated with sonic or oral registers. Martinican philosopher and poet Édouard Glissant conceived of the Caribbean as a region constituted through a “confrontation” between the oral and the scribal (*Caribbean Discourse* 151; Bailey), which pitted Amerindian and African orality against European letters. Glissant’s solution, in his own poetics, was to find the “pure pleasure of writing at last a language *as one hears it*” (*Monsieur Toussaint* 14; emphasis original).

Writing a language as one hears it complicates the dichotomy introduced by Latin American colonialism between the written and the oral, famously articulated in Ángel Rama’s notion of the “lettered city.” Rama argued that throughout the process of colonial urbanization, intellectual elites used literacy to consolidate political power (Rama). Responding to this idea, the sonic turn in Latin American literary and cultural studies suggests that while alphabetic technology was undoubtedly deployed as an instrument of colonization and control (Lévi-Strauss 347–60; Cornejo Polar 41), “the uses of the ear in relation to the *voice* imbued the *technology of writing* with the traces and excesses of the acoustic” (Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality* 7). Ana María Ochoa Gautier offers an important rereading of the lettered city, providing compelling evidence that lettered traditions were significantly constituted by practices of listening associated with communities considered “nonliterate” (*Aurality* 4). That is, writing was unavoidably and inextricably linked with language (and sound) as one hears it.

Writing becomes a “noisy” enterprise, disrupting the apparently stable distinction between sound and silence.<sup>4</sup> As José Miguel

Wisnik argues, given its oscillatory nature, sound is itself always permeated by silence: "there is always sound within silence" (18).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, recent research in cognitive science suggests that we *perceive* silence, just as we perceive sound (Goh et al.). Scholars of sound in Latin America demonstrate that we can also perceive sound within text. Their work approaches sound through aurality (Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality*; Robinson; Librandi; Finley), media history (Martín-Barbero; McEnaney, *Acoustic Properties*; Bronfman), poetics (Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*; Masiello; Ellis Neyra), music (Aparicio; Chornik; Torres; Garabís; Hamilton), race (Lienhard; Munro; Hill; Robbins), and literacy (Cornejo Polar; Acosta; Moreno), among other topics.

The heterogeneous and multidisciplinary nature of this work necessitates a *conjunctural* approach to sound that thinks various domains—musical, scientific, linguistic, theological, political—in relation to one another" (Steingo and Sykes, "Introduction" 7). To these domains, I would append the poetic, the philosophical, and the anthropological (see McEnaney, "Sonic Turn" 86). In addition,

an inquiry into "Words and Rhythm, Sound and Text" requires a *self-reflexive* approach: an ongoing practice of learning to listen to literature with the goal of developing new modes of reading.

Francine Masiello argues that "la voz poética enseña a escuchar; se convierte en un recurso ético para asistirnos en la tarea de presentar nuestra relación con un tiempo y un lugar" (15), as well as our relationship with others. I believe we can understand this poetic voice broadly. All writing has the capacity to teach us to listen. At stake is a poetics of "listen[ing] to difference without forcibly overcoming it" (Ellis Neyra xii), of learning to "listen *for* and *from*" Latin America, to the possibility of "sonic solidarities" that cut across traditional geographical and geopolitical borders (Steingo and Sykes, "Introduction" 25). "What is heard is changed by listening and changes the listener," asserted composer Pauline Oliveros (30), drawing on the insight from quantum mechanics that the observer influences the object being observed. By "listening in/to literature" (T. L. Mitchell), we change the texts we read/hear, and they change us. Here, then, is the ethical imperative of sound studies.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> One rich example of the interface between words and rhythm can be found in the ceremonial *batá* drums of the Afro-Cuban religion Regla de Ocha, also known as Santería. In *batá*, percussionists use a set of three drums to elaborate a polyrhythmic dialogue of patterns, or *toques*, that translate a Yoruba-derived liturgical language into the language of *oricha* divinities. In some cases, *toques* imitate the phonetics of Yoruba; in other cases (for example, in the pedagogical context of teaching the *toques*), the vowels and consonants of the drums are vocalized in speech. On the analogy between music and language, see Bonds; Sakakeeny 115.

<sup>2</sup> As Jonathan Sterne notes, sound studies is marked by a pervasive anthropocentric ableism, an "epistemological and political bias toward an idealized, normal, nondisabled [and human] hearing subject" ("Hearing" 73). See also Mills.

<sup>3</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*. Jacques Derrida extensively critiqued what saw as the subordination of writing to speech in Western metaphysics (part of an understanding of being as presence, the "metaphysics of presence"), arguing instead that all language is writing (6–28).

<sup>4</sup> The distinction between sound and silence was significantly questioned by composer John Cage. In 1951, Cage famously entered an anechoic chamber and perceived the sounds of his nervous system and blood circulation (see Ochoa Gautier, "Silence" 184). His subsequent musical composition 4'33" (1952) invited hearing ambient noise ("silence") as music. A related dichotomy between hearing and seeing has been widely critiqued by Sterne, who observes the "theological overtones" of enumerating the differences between sound and sight (the "audiovisual litany"), problematic because it treats sound as transhistorical and transcultural and "posits history as something that happens *between* the senses," rather than within them, or even *to* them (*Audible Past* 15–19).

<sup>5</sup> "há sempre som dentro do silêncio."

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