

Reading the Politics Of Recorded Sound

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Abstract

Just released this past month, Social Text 102: The Politics of Recorded Sound is the latest special issue to take the temperature of the field of sound studies.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Sound Studies and Aurality (Topic), Experimental and Cognitive Psychology (Subfield), American Studies, Listening, Radio, Recording, Sound Studies



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Just released this past month, [Social Text 102: The Politics of Recorded Sound](#) is the latest special issue to take the temperature of the field of sound studies. Answering the provocative question posed by [Michelle Hilmes](#) in a 2005 review essay for [American Quarterly](#) (which will soon have its own [special issue on sound](#)), “[Is There a Field Called Sound Culture Studies? And Does It Matter?](#)” with a resounding “yes! and yes!”, the issue elegantly captures both the rigorous possibilities and the vexing challenges of this now-emerged interdisciplinary field. ST 102 is edited by [Gustavus Stadler](#), Associate Professor of English at Haverford College, and the issue curates interdisciplinary essays by [David Suisman](#), [Mara Mills](#), [Jennifer Stoeve](#)(yours truly), Stadler, [Alexandra T. Vasquez](#), and [Jayna Brown](#) that challenge traditional technology-driven narratives of recording history by excavating the multiple, conflicted, and sometimes generative ways in which sound recording is tangled in networks of power like an old cassette tape gone wrong.



Given space limitations and my own vested excitement over the issue, my writing here will be more preview than review, slicing you off a tantalizing tidbit rather than chewing it all up for you. It really is something that critical sound studies heads will want to mull over on their own, and toward that end, I include links to each piece that take you to *Social Text*'s newly-revamped [website](#) where you can read the abstract, listen to hand-selected audio supplements, and download the article if you have an institutional subscription. My analog peeps can order hard copy of the issue [here](#). Readers in the New York area can celebrate the issue's release on [Friday, April 30th @ NYU's Tisch Center](#).

Gustavus Stadler's "[Introduction: Breaking Sound Barriers](#)" takes the supposed transparency of recording technology to task and asks readers to consider not only what recording has enabled but what it has foreclosed. Eschewing technological determinism, Stadler writes, "what matters here is learning how to hear what power, history, culture, and difference sound like. Those categories are, ultimately, the 'technology' of sound recording" (10-11).

David Suisman's "[Sound, Knowledge, and the 'Immanence of Human Failure': Rethinking Musical Mechanization through the Phonograph, the Player-Piano and the Piano](#)" recounts the forgotten history of the player piano, which once battled it out with the phonograph for the title of sound playback technology du jour. After reading Suisman, the ways in which scholars have tuned out the player piano will seem utterly surprising, given its importance as a forerunner of digital modes of reproduction.

Mara Mills's "[Deaf Jam: From Inscription to Reproduction to Information](#)" tackles the complex history of the telephone, arguing for a more prominent place for telephony in media studies and exposing the submerged history of the use of disabilities within technoscience. Though deaf participants were invaluable in the quest to make speech more "streamlined," scientists and marketers eventually redacted deaf populations themselves in the name of "efficiency."

My "[Splicing the Sonic Color-line: Tony Schwartz Remixes Postwar Nueva York](#)" introduces readers to [Tony Schwartz](#), sound artist and audio thinker, and reads his 1955 Folkways recording [Nueva York](#) as symptomatic of the ways in which listening experiences both reflect and generate ideas about racial difference and American citizenship. Using archival methods to reconstruct the soundscape of 1950s New York, I theorize the presence of what I call the "sonic color-line" in the U.S., linking sound and listening to bodily codes of race.

Gus Stadler's "[Never Heard Such a Thing: Lynching and Phonographic Modernity](#)" explores the quiet-as-its-kept rumors of on-site lynching recordings made in the nineteenth century, using archival methods to expose their falsehood even as he notes how the presence and circulation of lynching (re)productions reveals another edge of the centuries-long white obsession with black voices and the marketability of black pain. Stadler very powerfully connects the "cheapness and tenuousness" of cylinder inscriptions with the "cheapness and tenuousness of black lives as shaped by the white supremacist turn-of-the-century United States" (103).

Alexandra T. Vasquez's "[Can You Feel the Beat'? Freestyle's Systems of Living, Loving, and Recording](#)" takes us into New York's recording studios in the 1980s to amplify the suppressed experiences and unsung professionalism of Freestyle's leading divas: Nayobe Gomez, Judy Torres,

Cynthia Vasquez's critical labor enables us to hear these singers anew, exploring their work as theorists of the everyday, crafting pleasure, pain, and experience into a set of "bad ass armaments" for their listeners (122).

And finally, Jayna Brown's "[Buzz and Rumble: Global Pop Music and Utopian Impulse](#)" reimagines both "world music" and "utopia" in her provocative essay on digital music's newfound (and decentered) possibilities: to subvert national boundaries, evade corporate control, and heal bodies torn apart by capitalism and seemingly perpetual war. Tracing the complex links between *Congotronics*, Buraka Son Sistema, M.I.A. and kuduro music in Angola, Brown's essay is not only a resonant reminder of the liberatory potential of music, but of scholarship as well.

JSA

