Njelle W. Hamilton, *Phonographic Memories: Popular Music and the Contemporary Caribbean Novel*. New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2019. xiv + 222 pp. (Paper US\$ 34.95)

How does one read musical novels? Njelle Hamilton proposes that novels in which music and recording technologies figure prominently offer an opportunity to consider a variety of themes, including memory, nostalgia, belonging, and the making of exilic identities. *Phonographic Memories* admirably ignores the Anglo/Hispanic Caribbean divide and takes as its objects of study Lawrence Scott's *Night Calypso*, Oscar Hijuelos's *Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, Daniel Maximin's *Lone Sun*, Colin Channer's *Waiting in Vain*, and Ramabai Espinet's *Swinging Bridge*. In all of these, recorded music is related to memory, and Hamilton explores the variety of ways it acts as the medium through which the characters negotiate their relationship to place and to their own pasts. The main characters, she argues, are frequently constrained by the nostalgia and inherent conservatism of recording technology and of certain musical genres. But they also find a way forward, a way into the future that music opens up for them.

Hamilton relies on music and technology to bear a large proportion of the analytical burden. They are metaphors and archives as well as indications of certain identity formations; they both silence and give voice to the characters' thoughts and feelings. The methodological approach consists principally of careful, detailed analysis of the plots and characters. These range widely and represent aspects of Caribbean life from Cuban exiles' love-hate relationship with Cuba, domestic violence in Trinidad, and the transnational and peripatetic experiences of young professionals in London, New York, and Kingston. The analysis also draws from a variety of disciplinary approaches to memory, including neuroscience, psychoanalysis, and literary criticism. With regard to sound studies, the book remains within a strand of sound studies that reads for sound in literary texts. Since novels are about probing the interiority of its characters, the connections between identity, memory, and personality are much more in evidence than they are in the historical record, where it is rare to encounter what media theorists call reception, or a sense of how listening works and what kinds of reactions it prompts.

Some chapters move beyond plots and characters and incorporate contextual information regarding the uses of recording technology or listening practices. The chapter on *Waiting in Vain*, for example, includes descriptions of the development and use of sound systems in Jamaica, and historical notes on the early recording industry and the emergence and eventual adoption of reggae as "national music." Hamilton cites Louise Bennett and refers to Bob Marley

and Marcus Garvey as she weaves together a portrait of Jamaican listening over time, rather than remaining within the confines of the novel's parameters. *Phonographic Memories* is thus a welcome addition to the literature on listening and music-recording practices in the Caribbean in general. Hopefully it will spur more work in this area, drawing on different disciplines.

At times Hamilton invokes the novels' supposed audiences and suggests that readers might be prompted to rethink their relationship to sound and music. Her discussion of *Night Calypso* concludes with the claim that "Scott proposes sound reading as an ethical and relational practice connecting author, narrator, character and reader" (p. 47). This assertion would be strengthened, however, with a more robust exploration of the novels themselves as objects embedded within particular cultural processes and power relations. The readers of these novels do not in the end receive much attention, nor do the potential or presumed cultural or political roles of the authors and their intellectual production. When these novels were written, was there a changing or specific role for the Caribbean novel with relationship to other genres or other forms of media? What were the specific circumstances that inspired these authors, writing in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, to take on this set of questions surrounding memory, music, and inscription? I wondered about the political economy of writing and publishing, the intended audiences, and the role of Caribbean authors in both island and diasporic literary contexts. They seemed to exist in a vacuum rather than, as David Scott might suggest, being embedded in a series of conversations and responding to a series of exigencies or dilemmas. As a way to further situate the novels within discussions about postcolonial futures, this might have been an intriguing line of inquiry.

Alejandra Bronfman

Department of Latin American, Caribbean and Latina/o Studies,
University at Albany, SUNY, New York NY, USA
abronfman@albany.edu