
With *Listening to the Caribbean*, Martin Munro proposes to widen the sensorial engagement of Caribbean studies by bringing sound-studies perspectives into what he argues has been a predominantly visual field. In three lengthy chapters bracketed by an introduction and a “coda,” he proceeds to listen to Caribbean history by reading well-known historical documents against the grain. In doing so, he complicates the idea that colonial racism functioned primarily through the visual, arguing instead that a battle of the senses played out in Caribbean plantation societies—a battle that pitted a regime of surveillance and punishment shaped by the ocular-centrism of European philosophy against the aural culture of the enslaved and the multiple manifestations of sonic resistance it engendered.

In an exploration that ranges from a critical reading of the Code Noir and its application in Louisiana to practices of adornment, from the plantation to the “loud” fashion of the Jamaican dancehall, Chapter 1 outlines an “Atlantic culture of the ear.” Building from anthropologist Kathryn Geurts’s work on the sensory world of the Anlo-Ewe (*Culture and the Senses*, 2003), Munro argues for the centrality of the ear—as the organ for hearing and listening, the site of our sense of balance, and an object to be seen and therefore adorned—in an African-diasporic sensory orientation. In Caribbean colonies, this Black culture of the ear was creolized and became something to be feared and controlled, prompting prohibition against drumming, limitations on personal adornment through dress or jewelry, and punishments such as ear cropping, which physically and symbolically targeted this auricular culture.

Chapter 2 further elucidates the tension between an Atlantic culture of the ear and a European “epistemological regime of the eye” on Caribbean plantations. There Munro seeks to amplify the sonic traces present in the works of European chroniclers, and thus make audible the soundscapes of Caribbean slavery. Importantly, he also establishes sound as the “nexus around which conflicting notions of culture, civilization, and race take shape and solidify, or else are destabilized and undercut” (p. 79). Touching on the topic of sonic resistance, he shows how music and dance, as well as the circulation of rumors or the silent refusal to express pain when punished, constituted examples of what Glissant called the “detour” and served to undermine the plantation regime of racial violence.

Chapter 3 further investigates sounds of resistance, shifting the focus from everyday practices of indirect resistance toward organized rebellions. Munro spotlights three distinct moments and locations: the Haitian Revolution, the...
eighteenth-century Dutch expeditions against the Maroons of Suriname, and the 1831 Baptist War that hastened abolition in Jamaica. As he did with the soundscapes of Caribbean plantations, he works to make audible the sounds of rebellion, showing that sounds could serve as a tactical weapon against slavery, but also that European mishearing of Black Caribbean culture weakened the colonial system.

The book’s coda brings this sonic history to the postemancipation period. Through discussions of the Torres Strait expedition in 1898 and the human zoo of the 1904 World’s Fair, Munro demonstrates how early-twentieth-century anthropologists continued to rely on (mis)hearing in their sensory construction of race and affirmation of White supremacy. Jumping to the advent of reggae in Jamaica, he briefly turns his attention to the importance of sound in Caribbean projects of decolonization, before “listening to the soundscapes” of Caribbean literature with an even briefer discussion of Césaire’s poetry.

*Listening to the Caribbean* delivers on its promise to sensorially enliven our understanding of Caribbean history. While the book builds on previous studies (such as chapters in Munro’s own *Different Drummers*; Edwin Hill’s *Black Soundscapes, White Stages*; or my own *Creolized Aurality*), it shines by its wide historical and geographic breadth. If the chapters are lengthy (two of them exceed 40 pages), they can easily be read independently from one another, an asset for those teaching Caribbean studies courses. Overall, this is an important contribution to the literature on Caribbean history and a strong invitation for others to further engage sound—and the senses more generally—in the study of the region.

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