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NO TRANSMITTER

CLANDESTINE RADIO LISTENING COMMUNITIES IN RICARDO PIGLIA'S *THE ABSENT CITY*

Tom McEnaney

At the center of the Argentine writer Ricardo Piglia's 1992 novel *The Absent City (La ciudad ausente)* is a storytelling machine built from an unfinished technology: a radio without a transmitter. As the device's inventor explains, "I had begun to combine certain formulas . . . and I applied them to a radio receptor. Back then I hadn't yet been able to make a transmitter, only a recorder. My closet was filled with tapes, recorded voices, song lyrics. I couldn't transmit. I could only capture the waves and the memories from the ether" (145).[1] The engineer's description begs the simple question: What is radio? In Piglia's novel and in the critical theory that has accumulated around radio as a technology and cultural object, this ontological question, which emerges from a series of mechanical questions—Do all radios have recorders built inside them? Does a radio need a transmitter?—leads to a series of cultural questions: what is the difference between receiving and transmitting? How does radio connect one listener and another? What kinds of political community does radio make possible?

Addressing the forms that radio might take goes some way toward imagining the social worlds it might produce. The engineer's insistence on the radio as a receptor without a transmitter, for instance, points to the complicated legislative, technological, and cultural histories that lie behind the common understanding of a radio as an aural medium intended for listening to the sonic transmissions of others. The expectation that a radio would, by necessity, include a transmitter points back to early wireless radio, an age defined by amateur radio enthusiasts receiving and transmitting signals before the consolidation of broadcast networks in the early 1920s in the Americas and Europe led to the proliferation of radio receiving sets—those devices we have come to commonly refer to as radios.[2] Beyond that moment, as governments

regulated bandwidth and parceled out frequencies, largely criminal-izing amateur radio, the practice of radio transmission and reception continued in clandestine and rebel or pirate radio networks throughout the world, helping to define musical subcultures and—as the critical writings of Frantz Fanon, Ernesto "Che" Guevara, and others explain—galvanize and shape anticolonial political communities.[3] These radio communities formed sonic counterpublics—their broadcasts public, by technological necessity, and geared toward countering the messages from stations of a colonial government, commercial corporation, or state-run news service. By insisting that he made only a radio receiver and not yet a transmitter, Piglia's inventor situates his device within this lineage and reminds readers how a given medium's political func-tion depends in part on how cultural users shape its technological pos-sibilities, and how some technological forms—such as a radio with a transmitter—index the histories and practices concealed or forgotten when we understand a medium like radio as solely a device intended for tuning in to other voices.[4]

While the invocation of the transmitter includes the inventor's tech-nology in a rebel radio genealogy, he then turns away from transmis-sion to grant this notion of political power to the receptive function he insists on instead. It is this receptor, and the idea of reception itself, which will become the novel's central preoccupation as a community of political rebels forms around the storytelling machine the inventor will build from his radio receiver. The invocation of transmission, and its subsequent rejection, thus begins to point toward *The Absent City*'s construction of an alternative idea of the political power of a commu-nity of rebel radio *listening.* While the idea for such a community re-sponds to and derives from Argentina's particular national history, a history I will return to in greater detail below, Piglia's more general critique of radio's political possibilities rests on and against a belief that activist politics requires a speaker who transforms the world through his or her speech. Such a belief pervades both left- and right-wing political ideology. However, in order to sharpen a reader's sense of how Piglia's novel proposes a nuanced alternative to the political posi-tions he usually endorses, we might take Bertolt Brecht's influential 1932 essay "The Radio as a Communication Apparatus" as a counter thesis that remains especially representative of the critical attitudes surrounding radio and media more generally.[5]

Bemoaning a moment wherein radio has already forgotten its ama-
teur transmitters, Brecht famously argues that radio fails as a social
medium because it isolates the listener instead of "bring[ing] him into
a network" (42). For Brecht the medium houses a simple solution: "The
radio must be transformed from a distribution apparatus into a com-
munication apparatus" (42). Or, in market terms, it "should step out of
the supply business and organize its listeners as suppliers" (42). Only
when radio is able "to receive as well as to transmit," and "let the lis-
tener speak as well as hear," will the medium become "the finest pos-
sible communication apparatus in public life, a vast system of channels"
(42). Seize the means of production, Brecht writes, and radio listeners
will liberate themselves.

Piglia's novel moves directly against the current of Brecht's rally-
ing cry. While Brecht's call to transform the passive listener into an
active speaker has become a staple of academic and popular media
theory, reminding us how old our debates about new media tend to
be, Piglia's listeners and engineers depart from that theory to value
reception over transmission.[6] With this departure, *The Absent City* antic-
ipates the renewed attention to listening that has accompanied the
surge of investigations into the history and theory of recording and
broadcasting media developed from around 1876 onward. The inven-
tor in Piglia's novel, and his interest in the radio receiver, makes most
sense alongside those scholars attending to how listening can police
social norms, how sound has been commodified through telephone
companies' experiments with the deaf, how mp3 file sharing became
possible by determining how to exclude parts of sound that were
already aurally indistinguishable against the background noise of a
city street, or how traditional religious listening practices evolved in
conjunction with the popularization of the cassette tape. Like the por-
trayal of radio rebels in Piglia's novel, this last decade of criticism con-
nected to the emerging field of sound studies has developed a sense of
mediated listening as an embodied, complex set of practices irreduc-
ible to binary distinctions that would posit an active visual culture
against a passive auditory culture.[7]

In what follows, I hope to bring these critical studies of mediated
listening into dialogue with Piglia's novel, a work that represents the
development of listening practices in relation to oral technology—espe-
cially radio and tape—and then converts these modes of listening into

a writing practice, as well as an effective resistance to governmental censorship, surveillance, and oppression. In doing so, the listening practices represented in the novel help develop a writing practice that would serve as an alternative to the "testimonial" genre sometimes thought of as the most useful form of political resistance to tyrannical power, but which often seems to merely invert the authority of the monologic radio voice.[8] This new narrative mode, a narration that listens and a listening that narrates, would take seriously Roland Barthes's argument that "freedom of listening is as important as freedom of speech," and that "it is not possible to imagine a free society, if we agree in advance to preserve within it the old modes of listening" (259).[9] However, as will become clear in the pages below, in *The Absent City* even those "old modes of listening" Barthes and other critics might have dismissed for their interest in dislocation, nostalgia, and escapism, provide the weak but necessary freedom to form a clandestine listening and recording community whose political value derives from the willingness to let other things speak.

In Piglia's novel, the movement toward this surprising political position begins with the story of a journalist, Junior, investigating the source of a tipster's telephone voice.[10] Negotiating his way through this hardboiled dystopian thriller set in a thinly veiled Buenos Aires of 1992's near future, Junior discovers that this voice belongs, if that is the right word, to Elena, the name of a consciousness presumed to be the late wife of the Argentine author Macedonio Fernández, programmed into a machine housed in the city's central museum. Due to a mechanical glitch, or what cybernetics and systems theory might call autopoetic adaptation, the same machine has gone from producing strangely modified versions of classic nineteenth century tales, such as Edgar Allen Poe's "William Wilson," to issuing troubling political testimonies. These insurgent tales then circulate on cassette tapes through the city's clandestine underground to the consternation of the police state. The stories, which Junior listens to on his Walkman throughout the book, come to the reader as fragmentary chapters that make up the bulk of the novel's discourse. To read Piglia's novel, then, is to study the discursive art of listening and overhearing.[11]

The role of listening in *The Absent City* has not been missed by critics. Gareth Williams has remarked that the novel opens with "an ear" and with the "foundational role of radio in the formation of popular

culture and politics in Argentina" (159). More precisely, the novel opens with two ears, and two distinct scenes of listening to two different forms of media. The first describes Junior's father, an English immigrant to Argentina's southern hinterlands, come to work as the station chief at the end of the railway line:

> He spent his sleepless nights *[las noches en blanco]* in Patagonia listening to the shortwave transmissions from the BBC in London. He wanted to erase the traces *[borrar los rastros]* of his personal life and live like a lunatic in an unknown world, hooked into the voices that came from his country. (11)

Although couched within a scene of lonely listening, nostalgic for empire, this two-sentence overture evokes the themes of exile, nationhood, aural transmission, and disappearance that obliquely anticipate the narrative's reflection on Argentina's dictatorial period and the "Dirty War" that left more than thirty thousand Argentine citizens "disappeared."[12] Whereas Junior's father might merely want to forget his individual pains, the radio's complicity in "erasing the traces" of a personal life will later resound in the novel as disturbingly coincident with the Argentine national military's project to make personal lives vanish throughout the country.

The passage's connection between the personal, the national, and the imperial—a network of relations already threaded into the social conditions of broadcast technology's engineering—also links this apparently local scene to a more general historical and conceptual affiliation with radio. For scholars of radio theory and history, the association raised here between radio and a certain traceless archive of genocidal acts recalls an entire tradition of predominantly European-focused scholarship that exclusively connects radio with a dictatorial Fascist voice.[13] In an exemplary commentary on late 1930s French radio plays and the radio theory in Europe during the same period, Denis Hollier writes,

> The characteristic specific to radio is that it is live. . . . Radiophony demands live speech, voices flowing freely from the source, without leaving behind any archivable precipitates. In this sense, radiophonic utopia is a glorification of the drive that Derrida called 'anarchival' and Michel Deguy qualified as 'lethal.' (19)[14]

Radio's live character makes it lethal, in this schema, because the radio voice fails to leave behind "archivable precipitates," indices, or inscriptions—the material traces that Friedrich Kittler and others identify as

the ontological features of early sound recording technology like the gramophone. Without recourse to such inscription, "radiophonic utopia" would seem to render obsolete the material support of these technologies, as well as the printed book; hence, Hollier's title, "The Death of Paper: A Radio Play." Indeed, the radio plays and theory that aired in France and Germany in the 1930s were also contemplated alongside broadcasts of Nazi book burnings, a political event symbolically linking the death of paper to human extermination.

Radio's status as a "live" and "traceless" medium would mark it as ontologically distinct from those other media—gramophone, film, typewriter—called on to define modernity's discourse network. However, it should be noted that radio's "live" status derives more from its *simultaneous* communication with a mass audience than its apparently "anarchival" quality. Radio does leave traces—only an overly literal rendering of Derrida's argument would exclude the social and psychological impact registered by listeners of even early radio broadcast— and, as media historians have shown, almost coincident with radio's rise critics began debating the relative success or failure of a broadcast's ability to transmit a sense of place through the sonic indices or traces of a room, street, or voice across the ether.[15]

While historically and technologically inaccurate, interpreting radio broadcast's simultaneity as an ephemeral, noninscriptive event complicit with European Fascism and genocide has dominated the medium's reception in critical theory. On one hand, Piglia's choice of words situates his character within this tradition: radio's apparent tracelessness connects the scene to the events and legacy of World War II, a legacy Junior's English immigrant father brings closer to the novel's plot through his work for the British railway that was nationalized by Argentina's president Juan Perón in 1946.[16] On the other hand, the slight difference from Hollier's description of early radio theory is also worth noting. Unlike in those formulations, the radio in *The Absent City* does not simply fail to leave a trace. Instead, Junior's father listens in order to *actively* "erase the traces" of his personal life. It is precisely this tension between *being disappeared by another* and the potentially empowering possibilities of *choosing* to erase one's own individual subjectivity in favor of being "hooked in to other voices"—in a much different sense than that proposed by Brecht—that will resound as the core political concern in the novel's treatment of mediated listening.

Just one page after this brief theory of radio listening the reader hears a story about the father of Junior's fellow journalist, Renzi:

"It reminds me," Renzi said, "of my old man's sleepless nights *[las noches en blanco]* listening to the tapes from Perón that a member of the Movement brought to him undercover. . . . We were around the table, in the kitchen, at midnight, engrossed just like Junior's dad, but believing in that voice that came out of nowhere *[venía de la nada]* and always sounded a little slow and distorted. . . . It should have occurred to Perón to speak by shortwave radio . . . from Spain, in nighttime transmissions, with the discharges and the interference, because that way his words would have arrived in the moment that he spoke them. Or no? Because we listened to the tapes when the things were already different *[los hechos eran otros]*, and everything seemed delayed and out of place *[fuera de lugar]*." (11–12)

In this second account, radio retains its link to "live" broadcast, understood in this case as the utopian possibility of a simultaneity that would successfully collapse the distance of exile and allow Perón's words to fall into pace with the event. In contrast to the radio, however, the tape in this scene neither erases the traces of life nor sits nicely in the groove of time. The machinery affects the phenomenal experience of listening, rendering Perón's speech "slow and distorted." Likewise, the voice's misalignment with the present makes "everything seem delayed and *out of place.*" The tape's temporal dislocation, furthermore, unhinges Perón's voice from a localized space: "The voice came out of nowhere." In this domestic scene, the voice's acousmatic homelessness indexes the message's social and technological mode of production: it speaks of the exile of Perón, the famed nationalist radio orator, heard through the displaced character of the recorded voice.[17] An alternative to the way the BBC tunes Junior's father into the Empire from the periphery, the cassette tape, reliant on the Movement's clandestine network of hand-to-hand delivery, constructs an estranged second city inside the Argentine capital, a city listening to a distorted, delayed voice always out of place.

This historical precedent set by the Peronist rebel movement establishes a model for the tape network that will cohere around the cyborg's stories later in the novel. Renzi makes the connection explicit as he reflects on the fact that Perón's tapes remind him of the stories produced by the cyborg in the museum, which he finds fault with for their characteristic asynchrony. "It would be better if the story was live," he says. "The narrator should always be present" (12). Although he quickly

qualifies this aesthetic judgment—"Of course, I also like the idea of those stories that seem to be outside of time and start again whenever you want"—the connection between Perón's speech and the machine's stories underscores the message of political resistance that inheres within the tape technology's temporality. The machine's stories, neither guerrilla directives nor topical folk songs, and absent any immediate or obvious connection to the present, derive their political force from their lack of fit, their disruption of the state's seamless control over the national message. Their imperfect temporality, at once of the present and "outside of time," makes them hybrid objects, containers of the "noncontemporary within the contemporaneous" (Hirschkind, 19), or representatives of "the untimely present" whose pull between multiple, contested temporalities throws the present into question.[18]

Lastly, Renzi's insistence that the tape was "distorted," and that he would have preferred to hear Perón's radio voice through "discharges and interference," places this scene within a specific genealogy of mediated listening. Distinct from the massive address of "the voice of the Führer," the emphasis here on distorted domestic listening for political revolutionary ends recalls the anticolonialist sounds in Fanon's writing.[19] Readers familiar with Fanon's "Ici la voix de l'Algérie. . ." will recognize in these reflections on Perón's distorted voice something of Fanon's theory of revolutionary listening. As John Mowitt and Brian Edwards (2002) have convincingly argued regarding Fanon's text, distortion, in the Algerian context, signaled the French colonial authority's attempts to jam revolutionary broadcasts. Attentive listening to the distorted radio message became an expression of solidarity with the revolution, and helped constitute a collective, anticolonial community.

Renzi's emphasis on the distorted sounds throughout this passage similarly mark Perón's words as part of a rebel, clandestine network. In other words, the distortion signals to readers familiar with Argentine politics a nuanced, but powerful divide in the complicated legacy of Peronism. Serving an explicitly ideological function, the distortion separates Perón's utterance from his first two terms as the populist president of Argentina, when his voice could be heard clearly over the national radio or at mass rallies, and, more important still, it distinguishes his voice from his third term, after his return from exile in 1973, when his politics swung explicitly to the right, laying the groundwork for some of the policies that would lead to the "Dirty War."[20] Listening

back through history, Perón's distorted voice resounds as the most ideologically compatible for a novel that wants to connect it to a revolutionary political underground.

In choosing the tape over the radio in presenting Perón's voice, and, later, the voices disseminated through the cyborg Elena, Piglia urges us to consider the differences between the rebel radio voice and the Fascist voice, therefore complicating the tendency in the European continental tradition that exclusively links the radio voice with Fascism. More emphatically, Piglia takes up the cassette tape as a hybrid technology that exists only through the remediation of the radio and the phonograph, and attempts to use the newer medium of tape to rethink radio's political history. The turn to tape restructures the idea of the radio network, moving it away from the single broadcasting station and toward an underground community of rebel listeners making hand-to-hand deliveries. Strengthening the connection, Junior, strolling through an exhibit at the museum where the cyborg is housed, notices that among the objects on display and discussed in the machine's first taped story, "Steven Stevensen," are "Stevensen's phonograph, with a tape recorder and a radio" (101). Recalling the inventor's "radio without a transmitter," in this media ecology the tape takes as its content both the phonographic archival desire detailed by Lisa Gitelman, Friedrich Kittler, Jonathan Sterne, and others, as well as the radiophonic association with absent traces, in order to create a new discourse network based on recording, erasing, and copying, wherein we will uncover a theory and practice of mediated listening that functions as political action.[21] Furthermore, tape technology's easy manipulation of recorded material—part of the apparatus for terror and intimidation in the interrogations of the "Dirty War"—provides a model for Piglia's novelistic response, as his immanent theory of listening mines the dangers of aural media—passivity, erasure, isolation, and manipulation—to construct a nuanced counternarrative able to account for the usefulness of specific types of forgetting and the importance of objecthood in the formation of political communities.

MINOR FORGETTING

The Absent City's most ambitious representation of how listening and technology can engage and refashion bodies and consciousness, as well

as personal and (multi)national history, arrives halfway through the novel. Purported to be the machine's last story, the chapter "The White Nodes" ("Los nudos blancos") recalls already in its title the sleeplessness, "*las noches en blanco,*" that framed the reception of the radio and the tape in the scenes of Junior and Renzi's fathers' listening. The connection does not seem accidental, as this story elaborates how a certain Elena, who shares her name with the consciousness housed in the machine, has checked herself into a psychiatric ward as an undercover investigator. While there, Elena seeks an "eternal state of insomnia" (73) in order to prevent an engineer at the asylum, Dr. Arana, from reading her thoughts and uncovering the whereabouts of Mac, the leader of the popular resistance she supports, and the co-inventor of the machine Macedonio; the husband who programmed his late wife Elena's consciousness into the cyborg.[22] Against the search for "names and addresses" by Arana (whose name sounds suspiciously close to the Spanish word for spider, *araña*, the emblematic arachnid of networks), Elena's only defense is to forget the facts:

> She had to forget, she couldn't compromise the plans. She destroyed the [memory of her] meeting on the platform at Retiro Station, [her memory of] the bums toasting stale bread over a small fire. . . . *She had the ability to erase her thoughts,* like someone forgetting a word they were about to say. They would not be able to make her talk about what she didn't know. (71, emphasis added)

Much like Junior's father, who spent his sleepless nights listening to the BBC in order to erase the traces of his life, Elena stays awake to erase her thoughts. Yet her forgetting politicizes what was nostalgic longing in Junior's father's case. Unlike the broader tendency to simply imagine the radio's lack of a trace to collude with Fascist power, Elena's *minor forgetting* helps her escape the police state whose ultimate goal would be the total erasure Junior realizes the government has planned: "That's why there's so much control, Junior thought, they're trying to erase what is being recorded in the street" (65).[23] A minor erasure, in Elena's case, allows these recordings to continue to proliferate. As she is perhaps both a rebel operative and the cyborg responsible for producing these tapes, her ability to erase parts of her memory, to forget facts in order to protect clandestine information, reveals her consciousness to function like tape technology, a medium

capable of recording, erasing, and dubbing. Incorporating the lessons of the machine into the structure of consciousness allows her to further the political struggle against total erasure.

THE FREE MARKET OF MEMORIES

The analogy between consciousness and tape technology helps Piglia further restructure the idea of the radio network to more radical political ends. Rather than the familiar mass audience tuned in to a single station like the BBC, the novel turns to tape technology to imagine how dubbing, erasing, and recording might reconfigure the relationships between listeners. Distinct from either the Frankfurt school's passive culture industry victims, Fanon's anticolonial audience, or Jean-Paul Sartre's "practico-inert ensemble" of radio listeners who imaginatively construct their collective connection through a shared alienation from and inability to seize the means of production, Piglia's listeners form a collectivity based on a shared listening that effectively edits their individual identities into patchworks of stories, analogous to the storytelling mixtapes they pass through the underground.[24] This new notion of networked identity borrows from pirate radio as well as the black market to create a new form of narrative expression located in the novel's representative for this complex kind of ensemble (listening) identity: Elena.[25]

Piglia's attempt to narrate Elena's experience pushes his writing toward precisely the kind of listening narration I mentioned above. Ultimately unable to stay awake in Arana's laboratory, Elena slips in and out of what may or may not be hallucinations as the reader and doctor follow her train of thought, and the narrative oscillates between the asylum and an escape scene in which Elena evades agents of the state in the city streets. At this point the distance between these two worlds, the city street and the asylum, breaks down, as Dr. Arana directly repeats one of Elena's thoughts, which leads her to wonder, "Maybe she was thinking out loud *[pensando en voz alta]*" (75). No sooner has this thought crossed her mind or left her mouth then she announces, "This is a place free of memories *[un sitio libre de recuerdos]*. . . . Everyone pretends to be and is somebody else. The spies are trained to disown their own identities and use somebody else's memory" (75). The deictic confusion of place, the struggle in her spoken speech to regain

her footing between private and public, between the merely thought and the spoken expression, these ideas inhere in Elena's proposal that identity and memory function like exchangeable goods.[26] This reading retains the ambiguity in the original Spanish, "*un sitio libre de recuerdos,*" which I've translated literally as "a place free of memories" (a place without memories), but which we might also hear as "a free place [made] of memories," or rather, "a free market of memories."[27]

The language of the market is more than an analogy, as the memory exchanges Elena describes pertain to the resistance movement's clandestine cassette tape network: a network formed in opposition to the state's control of information and in league with the black market of electronic commodities attached to the city's infiltration by global capital. The connection between the black market and the dissemination of the machine's stories through this rebel underground finds its link in the machine's museum guard, Tank Fuyita. Described elsewhere in the novel as a former "smuggler of cheap watches on the free market *[el mercado libre]*" (166), Fuyita is also an inhabitant of the "Korean sector in the cellars of the Mercado del Plata," (80) or money market, the latter of which is situated between the streets Sarmiento and Lieutenant General Juan Domingo Perón: the two most powerful presidential figures in Argentine history. Thus, Fuyita embodies the globalization of national history through capital, as well as a new immigrant image of the Argentine revolutionary hero.

In this dialectical model Fuyita represents precisely the globalized technocracy the novel's protagonists fight against, as well as the revolutionary possibility a "marketplace of identities" holds open for the rebels. On one hand, the novel threatens to lose itself in the cyberpunk genre's techno-orientalist paranoia, as the state awaits Japanese technicians, the only ones apparently skilled enough to disable the machine's storytelling.[28] And yet, on the other hand, Fuyita's role as the cyborg's museum guard, as well as the agent who sneaks Junior the transcript that is the chapter "The White Nodes," points to the radical role of the black market. The cyborg quotes Fuyita as saying that "the end of contraband . . . is the end of Argentine history" (166), but this apparent "end" is also the means to proliferate the tapes' reproduction, as cassette copies continue to travel through the shadow markets, the goal or end of this contraband being the ongoing narration of an Argentine history the state wants its citizens to forget.[29]

Recalling Elena's "free site of memories," the underground commodity exchange is also a marketplace of identities wherein the exchange of subjectivities operates on the model of the clandestine tape network. On one level, we can read Elena as the character who struggles to resist Dr. Arana's interrogation, part of a rebel cell, actively erasing her thoughts as her story moves back and forth between the psychiatric hospital and the streets, tunnels, and backrooms of the city. On another level, what we experience as readers of "The White Nodes" is Elena the cyborg's consciousness as cassette tape, a consciousness passed from hand to hand, from scene to scene, as rebels erase strips of the recorded stories—stories that are, in fact, her memory—and edit and splice them with others.[30] *She narrates, in other words, the act of being heard.* If a cassette mixtape could write the story of its existence as it moved through a community of listeners, overdubbed with new songs or stories, erased, and re-recorded, that story would read like "The White Nodes."

Moreover, this narrative practice mimics the machine's storytelling mode, in which the machine tells only the stories of other people: aphasic children, shell-shocked soldiers, nuns possessed by Satan; people whose voices come from their bodies but no longer seem to belong to them.[31] Even in her closing "monologue," an homage and revoicing of Joyce's *Ulysses,* she becomes a circuit for other voices, as she declares, "I am Amalia, if they rush me I'll say I'm Molly. . . . I am her and also the others, I was the others, I am Hipólita . . . I am Temple Drake . . . Those stories and others I've already told. It doesn't matter who speaks" (164).[32] Thus, "Los nudos blancos" (The White Nodes) depicts not so much the novel's climax as its own conflicted attempt to untie itself (*nudos* means "knots" as well as "nodes") from the first-person genre of "testimonio" and, in a maneuver that recalls Junior's father, link itself to a network of anonymous voices speaking from a variety of narrative standpoints. As Piglia would write of Manuel Puig a year after the publication of *The Absent City,* Puig "begins to use the tape recorder, and submits the transcription of a voice and a true story to a complex process of fictionalization. . . . Puig fictionalizes the testimonial and erases its traces *[borra sus huellas]*" (1993, 115–16). Borrowing from Puig's lesson, the tape network, and by implication, the novel we are reading, embraces radio's link to erasure and then resists both radio's state consolidation under the sign of the single charismatic voice and

the traditional political response to that voice: the first-person singular of the "testimonio."

Different from either the radio orator or the testimonial speaker, the cyborg tells stories by listening to other voices that inhabit her. We should remember again that the novel's machine was originally built from a radio receptor without a transmitter, and that the political action in the underground consists not so much in telling stories, but in listening to them. Even the name of the machine's inventor, Emil Russo—a homonym, in Spanish, for Émile Rousseau, or Rousseau's *Émile*—points to the idea of reception, and the openness to inscription that undergirds the idea of the cyborg constructed on the basis of an unfinished radio.[33] Following only the first part of Brecht's call for a revolutionary radio—"to receive"—without the second half—"let the listener speak as well as hear"—Russo transforms the radio into a listening machine, and "The White Nodes" stands as the written record of this new form of storytelling.

CASSETTE TAPE COUNTERPUBLICS

The machine's storytelling both produces and is a product of the political network through which it moves. It is a network that arises, in a somewhat generic fashion, in response to the oppression of censorship. Indeed, in a surprisingly similar example to the novel's rebel community drawn from outside the fictional boundaries in which these underground rebel groups pass their voice recordings in cassette copies, anthropologist Charles Hirschkind has documented the social practice of listening to clandestine taped sermons in Egypt. As in *The Absent City*, Hirschkind notes that the electronic underground structures itself in response to state censorship: "Through the medium of the cassette tape, acts of individual audition—properly performed—could compensate for the limitations the state had imposed on public discourse. Silence the speaker, but his words would still proliferate and acquire agency through the actions of listeners within the electronic network" (55). Like Renzi's memories of his father, these networks of listeners emerged in relation to the radio, as the radio speeches of the Egyptian president Nasser, as well as the radio concerts of Umm Kulthum, established the protocols of a national listening community, one

that transformed into a cassette tape counterpublic beneath the silence of later state censorship (50–51).

In a move that further elucidates Piglia's novelistic use of such tape networks, Hirschkind turns to Walter Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller" to establish the very different relationship to authority inherent in proper listening, or what he names "effective audition": "Effective audition, an act that enables the integration of the narrative into the listener's own experience, requires a subordination to the authority of the storyteller and thus, in some sense, a heeding to the story itself. This is Benjamin's point about the 'naïve relationship' between speaker and listener" (27). Listening institutes a new dialogic structure, one that does not stop at submitting to the storyteller's authority, but yields in order to understand and pass on the story. In this social practice, listening leads to storytelling, and subjects learn to become conduits for the story's transmission. In *The Absent City*, Macedonio, the machine's programmer and Elena's widower, says, "The key . . . is that one learns through narrating. To learn means that one remembers what has already happened, and therefore gains experience" (42).[34] However, what distinguishes Benjamin's idealized oral communities of auratic laborers, and even the cyborg's stories, from the secondary aurality of Piglia's electronic underground is that the recorded story in Piglia's novel is *passed on without being retold*. The story circulates, collects, and mobilizes a popular community without necessarily rerouting itself through another's mouth. It both draws from the novel's social space, the isolated and individual experience Benjamin describes, and enacts the collective formation Benjamin posits on the side of orality.

My invocation of Hirschkind's study returns us to *The Absent City*'s struggle to imagine a political alternative to the charismatic and monologic male voice over the radio: a central concern for a novelist attempting to construct an alternative to the dictatorial legacies of not just Argentina, but a whole series of countries throughout Latin America. As I have described above, the posthuman but still gendered cyborg Elena represents one means of resistance. Discussing her construction, Russo claims that "we were trying to make . . . a female defense machine, against the experiences and experiments and the lies of the State" (142). If her polyphonic closing "monologue" presents us with the Scheherezade of 1001 female voices, the mostly anonymous listeners who make up the rebel underground might be thought of like the mute girl in one

of the machine's stories, as a collective "anti-Scheherezade, who heard the story of the ring each night from her father, one thousand and one times" (57). This crowd listens as part of their activism, but they do not speak. We never encounter their listening through any thick description. Unlike the scenes with Junior's or Renzi's father, no potential theory of "close" or "sensuous" or "ethical" listening emerges from the text. These listeners exist only as implicit characters, an almost silent crowd nearly out of earshot from within the narrative. And yet, they are Elena's necessary corollary, responsible for transforming the stories she recounts into the connective tissue of a political community.

Or rather, the tapes themselves are the connective tissue or, as Macedonio says, the "*trama común,*" the common weave, or common plot the listeners' hands stitch together. As I argued above, in "The White Nodes" Elena's ability to circuit stories through her consciousness, to take on other identities, to cut and splice her personal narrative with those of others, helps untie the knots that might lead to any original, single, unified identity. That analysis approached the nodes / knots from Elena's vantage point. However, we might also think of these nodes and knots as the listeners in the network. They are the ones who pass Elena on in "The White Nodes." They "tell" the story by recording it and sending it to another. The tapes, and perhaps by extension, Elena, are also a meeting point, a node, "the minimal link of a *thing in common,*" a connection formed through recording and recounting (Rancière, 2, emphasis added).[35] In finding this "thing in common" and forming their tape network, the rebel listeners do not surpass or abandon the radio. Rather, they reimagine the radio, not only through combining the techniques of radio's absent traces and the phonograph's insistent recording of those traces but also through the ability to hook in to other voices. In their hand-to-hand trading and copying of tapes, they bring the radio network into the street and into physical contact, spreading stories as if spreading a contagion of rebel consciousness.

The desires in *The Absent City* for a rebel radio that would grasp the most politically utopian aspects of the history of radio in Latin America—constructing a populist network that never consolidates into the single dictatorial voice—requires Piglia to dismantle what we have come to know as radio, and reimagine its auditory and social relations as if a vast number of invisible hands had been required to knit the

"wireless" world together. Of course, those hands *were* there, always holding aloft the voice and making it possible. This is why the novel remembers Perón's voice on the tape, rather than his more famous oratory over the radio. Within the rejection of that radio voice is a critique of the most tyrannical moments of Latin American radio history. It is a critique that hears in radio's first crackling signal the advance of the collapse between private and public spaces and the consolidation of the authoritarian nation-state. Dr. Arana stands as a symbol for both. Yet the resistance to such state power does not merely reside in the act of seizing the means of production. For unlike so many revolutionary theories of radio, Piglia's novel presents us with the *radio without a transmitter.* The political community forged by the cassette tape network recasts radio technology through an insistence on reception. Listening in to other voices, taking up the object position to let other things speak—these marks of effective audition listen in opposition to the subject position of the single, charismatic radio voice. Piglia's turn to the cassette tape, therefore, attempts to produce another story of the age of radio in Latin America, and, perhaps in anticipation of a file sharing future as well as a look back to the early years of clandestine radio, he seeks to acknowledge private listening experiences as acts of political audition.

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Notes

1. While all translations here are my own, I have consulted Sergio Waisman's excellent translation: Piglia (2000).

2. On the early history of radio in the United States, see Douglas; Doersken; Hilmes (2007); Peters. On the early history of radio in Cuba, see López; Salwen. The history of early Argentine radio is best covered in Matallana; Karush.

3. In his 1961 handbook *Guerrilla Warfare* (La guerra de guerrillas), Guevara writes, "The propaganda that will be the most effective in spite of everything, that which will spread most freely over the whole national area to reach the reason and the sentiments of the people, is spoken words over the radio *[la oral por radio].* The radio is a factor of extraordinary importance. At moments when war fever is more or less palpitating in everyone in a region or a country, the inspiring, burning word increases this fever and communicates it to every one of the future combatants" (137–38). See also Fanon; Soley and Nichols; Soley.

4. Matthew Fuller comments, "Any radio receiver can, with a modicum of fiddling, be converted to a transmitter. . . . The inverse correlation between loudspeaker and microphone continues this existence of the transmitter as mirror-world of the receiver" (25).

5. Allusions to and citations from Brecht abound throughout Piglia's work, most obviously in the epigraph to the latter's novel *Plata Quemada (Money to Burn),* where he quotes Brecht: "What is robbing a bank compared to founding one?" *(¿Qué es robar un banco comparado con fundarlo?)* (1993).

6. To take one recent popular example, see Andy Merrifield's critical response to Clay Shirky's new media utopianism and Malcolm Gladwell's critique of "weak-tie" online activism. For more academic studies of the relationship between old and new media, see Gitelman and Pingree; Chun and Keenan; Marvin.

7. See Stoever-Ackerman; Mills; Sterne (2006; 2012); Hirschkind.

8. For the most influential recent critiques of the testimonial genre, see Sarlo and John Beverley's account of Sarlo's work.

9. See Barthes.

10. For more on hardboiled fiction in Argentina, see Ludmer (1999; 2004).

11. For more on the role of overhearing in the novel, see Gaylin.

12. For more on the Argentine civil catastrophe known as the "Dirty War" (1976–1983), see Balderston et al.; Feitlowitz; Corradi, Fargen, and Garretón.

13. See Adorno and Horkheimer; Adorno; Brecht (2000); McLuhan; Kaplan; Apostolidis; Campbell. While the dominant reading of radio's political, historical, and cultural impact continues to be derived largely in reference to Fascism following the early Frankfurt School theory, a number of volumes have begun to widen the scope of the theoretical understanding of radio. See, in particular, Hilmes (1997); Hilmes and Jason Loviglio; Gallo; Birkenmaier; the articles and translations in the special issue of *Modernism/modernity,* 2009; Mastrini; Verma; Bronfman and Wood; Ehrick.

14. To argue, as Hollier does, that the absence of sound recordings from radio's early days makes those events necessarily "anarchival" would seem to delimit an especially narrow conceptual terrain for the Derridean "trace" and archive. For more on Derrida's thinking on these concepts, see Derrida.

15. See Hanrahan.

16. See Rozitchner; Misemer.

17. The term "acousmatic" indicates a voice whose origin cannot be identified. For more on the term, which has become commonplace in radio theory and sound studies, see the French film theorist Chion.

18. See Avelar.

19. Adorno and Horkheimer comment that under the culture industry in the United States "the radio becomes the universal mouthpiece of the Führer; his voice rises from street loud-speakers to resemble the howling of sirens announcing panic—from which modern propaganda can scarcely be distinguished anyway. . . . The gigantic fact that the speech penetrates everywhere replaces its content. . . . No listener can grasp its true meaning any longer, while the Führer's speech is lies

anyway. The inherent tendency of radio is to make the speaker's word, the false commandment, absolute" (159).

20.   See Donghi; Lejtman; Turner and Miguens.

21.   I borrow the term "remediation" from Bolter and Grusin. As their subtitle implies, Bolter and Grusin themselves borrow the logic of remediation from McLuhan's *Understanding Media,* where the latter already presents the idea that every medium takes another medium as its content. Kittler's term for a similar process is "medial ecology." Citing Kittler, N. Katherine Hayles remarks, "Like the phonograph, audiotape was a technology of inscription, but with the crucial difference that it permitted erasure and rewriting" (209).

   Piglia explicitly incorporates the logic of remediation into his character Emil Russo's explanation to Junior about the origins of the storytelling machine: "To invent a machine is easy, as long as you can modify the pieces of an earlier mechanism. The possibilities of converting something that already exists into something else are infinite" (140). The connection between the machine and radio is also implied elsewhere in the narration: "[Macedonio] thought about perfecting the 'apparatus' (that's what he called it), with the intention of entertaining the peasants in the villages. It seems to me a more entertaining invention than the radio, he said, but it's still too early to declare victory" (42). See Gitelman; Sterne (2003).

22.   "Mac," referenced throughout the novel, carries multiple, overlapping signifieds. While the name is short for Macedonio Fernández, it also obviously references the Macintosh computer, most famous in the year of the novel's publication for Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*–inspired television commercial in 1984, as well as, in a more literary vein, "the man in the Macintosh," the mysterious character from Joyce's *Ulysses.* (This last reference would seem more obscure if not for the fact that Piglia devotes an entire chapter in *The Absent City* to describing a utopian community whose bible is *Finnegan's Wake.*) Furthermore, the man Elena identifies as Mac when she emerges from an underground tunnel into an electronics repair shop seems to reference not only Macedonio or Russo, the machine's two inventors, but also Rodolfo Walsh, Piglia's esteemed forebear in Argentine political detective fiction, testimonial literature, and underground political activism. Walsh, as the Argentine author and journalist María Moreno told me, was an amateur electronics repairman who converted his television into a radio receptor to tune into the police's radio communications during the "Dirty War." A powerful voice of the leftist rebellion against the dictatorship, Walsh was murdered in 1977, a day after publishing his "Carta abierta a la junta militar" (Open Letter to the Military Dictatorship).

23.   Elena's forgetting here resonates with another, less overtly political scene of forgetting associated with Elena's husband, Macedonio, the co-creator of the cyborg that houses her consciousness: "He had discovered the existence of the verbal nuclei that keep remembrances alive, words they had used that brought all the pain back into his memory. He was removing them from his vocabulary, trying to suppress them, and establish a private language without any memories attached to it. A personal language, without memories, he wrote and spoke English and

German, so he would mix the languages, in order to avoid even grazing the skin of the words he had used with Elena" (148).

24. See Sartre.

25. Considering Piglia's turn to the free market as a model for reimagining radio collectivities, it is worth noting Frederic Jameson's comment in the introduction to the first volume of Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason:* "Certainly seriality also knows its paradoxes: it is indeed no accident that Sartre's principal extended illustrations are those of radio broadcasts and of the free market. In fact, I believe, the notion of seriality developed here is the only philosophically satisfactory theory of public opinion, the only genuine philosophy of media, that anyone has proposed to date: something that can be judged by its evasion of the conceptual traps of collective consciousness on the one hand, and of behaviorism or manipulation on the other. If this were all Sartre had managed to do in the *Critique,* it would already mark a considerable achievement (*neglect of which may reflect the turn of current media theory towards a problematic of the image* as much as anything else)" (xxviii, emphasis added).

26. I borrow the term "footing" from Erving Goffman's sociolinguistic analysis. See Goffman.

27. For more on the relation between Piglia's fiction and economic forces, see Levinson.

28. In Argentina, and in Piglia's work especially, *plata* points to multiple meanings. Literally "silver," via metonymy the word indicates money in general. However, in Buenos Aires, located on the Río de la Plata, an entire linguistic culture of *castellano rioplatense* exists. In his subsequent novel *Plata Quemada* (1997), Piglia makes use of *plata* to signify both the literal burning of stolen money, and the destruction and corruption of the *rioplatense* region.

29. What Colleen Lye has identified as "Asiatic racial form" in the context of fiction in the United States seems to function in Piglia's novel as Korean and Japanese characters are reified into a stereotype of "Asianness," scapegoated as the sole causal force behind global capital as well as a threatening inhumanness or mechanization of thought that Argentine political insurgents identify as both the origin of an unthinking adherence to state discipline and, paradoxically, the means by which to resist the nation's police state. In the novel's conclusion, Russo tells Junior, "The Japanese model of feudal suicide, with its paranoid courtesy and its Zen conformity, was Macedonio's main enemy. They make electronic devices [*aparatos*] and electronic personalities and electronic fictions, and in all the States of the world there is a Japanese brain that gives orders" (142). And yet the narrator describes "a Korean man, Tank Fuyita, [who] has been the keeper and the guard for years. He came with the second generation of immigrants, smugglers of cheap watches on the free market. They wore the watches on their arms, ten or twelve Japanese watches, and spoke in their Oriental whispers" (166). Fuyita, commodity smuggler and museum guard, two activities that help continue the rebels' diffusion of narrative history against the state's desire for total erasure, also rescues Elena and the Tano in "The White Nodes" by bringing them into the museum from

the streets, where Elena's narration reads, "The more criminal activity found among Asian refugees, the more Asian refugees that the police must recruit as informants. Insanity of resemblance is the law, the Tano thought. To look alike in order to survive" (77). Thus, the same rule of simulacra that allows the insurgents to escape the state through their exchange of identities is modeled on the racist logic of identifying all Others as the Same. The novel, therefore, desires to exclude Asianness as a category against which to define the insurgent subject, and yet this subject finds itself parasitic of this same model. In this, however, the novel merely follows the "techno-orientalism" that makes up the generic rules of the cyberpunk literature of William Gibson and Philip K. Dick that it borrows from throughout "The White Nodes" chapter. As Stephen Hong Sohn comments, "David Morley and Kevin Robbins assert that cyberpunk representations embody a kind of techno-Orientalism. They note: '[w]ithin the political and cultural unconscious of the West, Japan has come to exist as the figure of empty and dehumanized technological power. It represents the alienated and dystopian image of capitalist progress. This provokes both resentment and envy. The Japanese are unfeeling aliens; they are cyborgs and replicants' (170). Morley and Robins suggest that this offshoot of Saidian Orientalism manifests through ambivalence due to both a desire to denigrate the unfeeling, automaton-like Alien/Asian and an envy that derives from the West's desire to regain primacy within the global economy" (Sohn, 7). Piglia's "techno-Orientalism," as well as his more Saidian Orientalist invocation of Scheherezade, is at least as important as Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* and Fernández's *Museo de la novela eterna* (Museum of the Eternal Novel) in helping him develop a possible outer limit to the governmental censorship and surveillance against which he writes. See Lye 2005; 2008a; 2008b. See also Sohn.

30. Piglia's technique undoubtedly borrows from William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* (1959), itself an experiment in cutting up tape recordings and typewritten pages and then pasting them back together at random to create a narrative order beyond the author's control. The connection becomes obvious when, explaining the identity exchanges of the underground, the narrator cites Burroughs's novel without acknowledging it: "In New York half of the addicts are detectives" (76–77). I mention the allusion here because of the way in which Burroughs's work with identity exchange and the cut-up technique relates to radio in particular. See, for instance, Brian Edwards's chapter on Burroughs in Edwards 2005: "Steven Shaviro has suggested that one of the 'lessons' Burroughs teaches his readers is that language is a virus. . . . Language's function in this frame is not to communicate but to replicate itself. From this Shaviro derives the observation that individuals/authors do not try to express a 'self' but rather speak in tongues, channel messages as the radio does" (181). A page earlier Edwards writes, "[Burroughs] was clearly well aware of the connection between Tangier as international radio relay station, as a site where the voices of the world mingled in static, and as a historical crossroads on which imperial and emergent nations encounter one another in proximity (both geographical and historical). In his journals, Burroughs writes: 'It is frequently said that the Great Powers will never give up the Interzone because of its value as

a listening post. It is in fact the listening post of the world, the slowing pulse of a decayed civilization, that only war can quicken" (180).

31.   The political ambition in this network is to follow the model of the rebel contact Grete Müller, another inhabitant of the "Korean sector" who, realizing her consciousness "had been infiltrated . . . buried her past and adopted a fictitious one" (75). This expedient maneuver for political purposes then leads to an aesthetic ideal in the production of photographs that reveal her ability to "look at the world with eyes that weren't her own" (75).

32.   The rush of female literary figures here includes Amalia, the eponymous character of the Argentine novelist José Marmol's 1851 novel about Juan Manuel de Rosas's police state, Molly Bloom from *Ulysses* (1922), Hipólita from Roberto Arlt's 1929 anarchist and revolutionary novel *The Seven Madmen (Los siete locos),* and Temple Drake from William Faulkner's 1931 novel *Sanctuary.*

33.   In her article "Rousseau's *Emile ou de l'education:* A Resistance to Reading," Janie Vanpée writes that "Rousseau's masterpiece . . . gives priority to one of the most fundamental problems of all pedagogical discourses—the problem of transmission, and in particular, of their own transmission" (156). Piglia's Emil Russo places the failure of transmission as the basis for his resistance to the censorious state against which he and the other rebels strive.

34.   This quotation echoes Benjamin's investment in "experience" *(Erfahrung)* as the governing problem that links technology and storytelling.

35.   The similarities between Rancière's thought, Hirschkind's reading of Benjamin, and my own analysis of the storytelling cyborg in Piglia's novel derive from an insistence on the democratic quality of storytelling. As Kristen Ross relates in her introduction to her translation of Rancière's *Le maître ignorant:* "Storytelling then, in and of itself, or *recounting*—one of the two basic operations of the intelligence according to Jacotot—emerges as one of the concrete acts or practices that verifies equality. (Equality, writes Jacotot, 'is neither given nor claimed, it is practiced, it is *verified.*') The very act of storytelling, an act that presumes in its interlocutor an equality of intelligence rather than an inequality of knowledge, posits equality, just as the act of explication posits inequality" (Rancière, xxii). If we read this lesson back into *The Absent City,* the rebels' listening network might be seen to represent an especially radical commitment to equality.

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