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REVIEW ESSAY

Wireless materials: radio cultures in Ireland, Latin America, and the United States at the mid-century

Theater of the mind: imagination, aesthetics, and American radio drama, by Neil Verma, Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 2012, 296 pp., \$31.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-0226853512

Ireland and the problem of information: Irish writing, radio, late modernist communication, by Damien Keane, University Park, PA, Penn State University Press, 2014, 208 pp., \$69.95 (hardback), ISBN 978-0271064123

Radio and the gendered soundscape in Latin America: women and broadcasting in Argentina and Uruguay, 1930–1950, by Christine Ehrick, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015, 310 pp., \$99.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1107079564 (Final manuscript version reviewed)

In a 30 November 2014 article in the *New York Times* about the rising popularity of audiobooks and the new production of 'straight-to-audio' novels, Alexandra Alter comments that 'some see the current audio renaissance as a modern version of the Golden Age of radio drama – a rare instance when technology is driving the evolution of an art form, rather than quashing it.'¹ Three recent books about radio at mid-century testify to why the study of radio and narrative seems especially urgent today. Taken together, the work of Christine Ehrick, Damien Keane, and Neil Verma elaborate a turn in radio studies towards the politics of embodied voices, the inscriptive traces of radio discourse, and the material conditions of production that make radio aesthetics possible.

Building on the work of US radio historians such as John Durham Peters, Susan Douglas, Michele Hilmes, Jason Loviglio, and Thomas Streeter, literary theorists including Anke Birkenmaier, Timothy Campbell, and Denis Holier, radio aestheticians like Frances Dyson, Douglas Kahn, and Jacob Smith, and film theorists such as Rick Altman, Michel Chion, and Kaja Silverman, these three books tune us in to the material conditions of radio discourse. Issuing an implicit correction to a long tradition in media theory to celebrate the 'disembodiment' of the radio voice, Ehrick, Keane, and Verma attend to radio's sonic history, as well as its representation and remediation in print, in order to tell the often muted story of radio.

While Verma develops a newly precise vocabulary to analyze the acoustic aesthetics of radio drama, Ehrick calls attention to the politics of gender and the sonic markers of embodied voice in *radioteatro* and political oratory, and Keane reminds readers of the political importance of the physical differences between long and shortwave broadcasts, as well as the networks of mediation – from gramophone records to printed transcriptions – that

helped sustain as well as alter the meaning and impact of radio voices. Taking as their object of study three different areas of the world – Ehrick, the *rioplatense* region of Argentina and Uruguay; Keane, Ireland, France, Italy, and New York City; and Verma, the US – the publication of these books mine the middle-half of the twentieth century, from the 1930s to the 1950s, to provide a more nuanced and richer record of radio's dramatic impact on world culture, and perhaps its return in a different form today.

Verma's book *Theater of the Mind* has already received the Best First Book Award from the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, a prize that testifies to the book's general importance for media scholars, and its necessity in radio studies. Based on original interviews, production notes, archival scripts, and 6000 audio recordings, and drawing on aesthetic and cultural theory, especially the work of Raymond Williams,² Verma's book finally brings sound to the surprisingly silent history of radio theory. More than any book since Rudolf Arnheim's (1936) *Radio*, Verma's study develops a precise vocabulary to distinguish radio's particularity as an aesthetic medium. Disappointed with what he, following Rick Altman, recognizes as radio theory and history's lack of attention to sound, Verma coins keywords like 'audioposition', 'radial immobility', and 'kaleidosonic' versus 'intimate' radio style in order to describe sonic technique and define what makes radio distinct from film, audiovisual theater, television, or print. By giving a name to these technical conventions he makes them audible as aesthetic choices, and therefore provides future scholars with a language to share and build on in their analysis of radio sound within and beyond the historical and national focus of Verma's own study. This new vocabulary and the book's keen attention to the intersection between sound and narrative art should also prove a valuable bridge between sound studies and literary theory.

As with much of the best work in sound studies, Verma's analysis joins knowledge of technical production – the different directionality and sensitivity of microphones, the material construction of reverberation in drama studios, the particularities of live and recorded sound effects machines – with the social, and in this case, aesthetic worlds to examine how their dynamic interchange helps shape the meaning of available technologies. In the book's most impressive chapter, 'Producing Perspective In Radio', Verma analyzes *The Fall of the City*³ to demonstrate how poet-playwright Archibald MacLeish's 'word', or intonation, meter, and diction produces sophisticated spatial effects that combine with director Irving Reis's 'microphone', or ambiance, acoustics, and volume in order to situate the listener within the scene of the unfolding drama. Verma recognizes that whereas the 'word', or the narrator's commentary in the play's climactic scene would position us on a balcony overlooking a crowd, the 'microphone' makes it sound as if we are positioned among the masses. That both perspectives can exist at once exhibits one of radio's unique capabilities. Moreover, in Verma's analysis, which links the play's rhetorical and sonic techniques to Franklin D. Roosevelt's 'fire-side chats', the construction of space in Edward R. Murrow's blitz broadcasts, and narrative experimentation in the novel, the conflict between these audiopositions marks 'a meditation on contradictions lurking in how New Deal culture processed the idea of addressing multitudes' (55). MacLeish's 'word' voices a 'pessimistic liberalism', whereas Reis's 'microphone' becomes the hopeful voice of the people. This stunning and convincing conclusion marshals narratology, poetics, acoustic science, sound design, and historical contextualization to draw new insights into the cultural politics of the New Deal government initiatives.

The book's other nine chapters are all nearly as remarkable in their movement between conventional techniques and fine-grained sonic and rhetorical analysis. One result of the

breadth of Verma's listening is his identification of how these conventions rise and fall in period styles. These styles divide the book into three overlapping historical modes. 1937–1945, he argues, marks US radio's sophisticated consolidation of the sound of space. Different 'sono-narratological' styles, the 'intimate' and the 'kaleidosonic', offer different models to negotiate New Deal liberalism's ideological struggle between individualism and populism. (Norman Corwin's work, especially *We Hold These Truths*⁴ serves as the representative example.) From 1941 to 1950 Verma recognizes a variation on this model, as radio begins to explore psychological interiority, especially in plays like Lucille Fletcher's *The Hitch Hiker*,⁵ but also conceives of subjects as circuits or conduits within a vast information network. At the same time, Verma identifies new character types, as the signalman, eavesdropper, and ventriloquist reflect this changing notion of personhood. Finally, with the rise of the Cold War from 1945 to 1955, Verma argues that radio's spatial aesthetics become increasingly immobile, and in a world of crime dramas and thrillers anxious about time running out, interiority becomes either paranoia or factual testimony where the dramas produce voices in order to reassure audiences that the system works.

This overlapping periodization reminds us of the stylistic diversity of the radio dial and historical unevenness, as the coexistence of certain techniques and genres waxed and waned in relevance or popularity, blurring the transitions between one dominant political and aesthetic culture and another. However, even with this more fluid movement between modes, the book's overarching organization sometimes fits too easily into received histories. While Verma uncovers rhetorical conventions and radio dramas that will most likely remain new to most readers, his conclusions about cold war radio as both paranoid and conformist fail to add anything to our general understanding of the period. And yet, the closing section's final reading of Antony Ellis's sci-fi thriller *Zero Hour* (1955), successfully pivots from this canned history, and returns to the sonic detail from the book's best moments to find in this tale of cold war paranoia a frightening allegory for radio drama's imminent death at the hands of television: a murderous child-alien who announces she has found her parents hiding in the dark with the drama's closing phrase: 'peek-a-boo'.

Christine Ehrick's impressive study of Argentine and Uruguayan radio also concludes with the advent of television, and begins, like *Theater of the Mind*, in the 1930s. Ehrick and Verma's books complement each other in various ways, as *Radio and the Gendered Soundscape in Latin America* addresses a major radio genre – melodrama – that Verma leaves out of his book, and seeks to pay more attention to the embodied and gendered sound of the radio voice. In the book's sweeping introduction, Ehrick, like linguistic anthropologist Nicholas Harkness's recent theory of the 'phonosonic nexus',⁶ underscores the need for a sonic analysis that would understand the voice as both a physiological and cultural object. Such an analysis is especially significant for performance and gender studies, as Ehrick argues that these fields too often divorce the 'voice' from sound, disembodiment voice as they celebrate it as a metaphor for autonomy and representation. Ehrick's study of radio voice insists that feminist history account for embodied voices in order to understand women's struggles for equal rights. Pointing out that radio emerged at a historical moment when women's voices were beginning to gain more access to the public sphere, Ehrick observes that even after engineers had resolved early radio technology's distortion of higher pitched voices, listeners continued to invoke this old fact as justification for excluding female voices from the airwaves. In order to have a 'voice', Ehrick reminds us, women needed to struggle to

redefine the technology and received modes of listening that too often turned the signal of their new authority into mere noise.

Ehrick addresses the implications of this insight across five chapters that discuss the feminist Paulina Luisi, the first all female-operated radio station Radio Feminina, the comedian Niní Marshall, the dramatists Silvia Guerrico and Nené Cascallar, and Eva 'Evita' Duarte de Perón. Thus, the book expands the regional reach of previous studies of gender in radio by Michele Hilmes and Kate Lacey, and fills in much of the untold role of women in Argentine and Uruguayan radio in recent histories by Andrea Matallana and Matthew Karush.⁷ Ehrick's original interviews, deep archival research, and methodological innovations make her book an indispensable contribution to radio studies.

Ehrick's most powerful analyses of the sonic politics of the gendered soundscape in Argentina occur in her discussion of Eva Duarte de Perón and Niní Marshall. Underscoring the critical inattention to the sonic attributes of one of the world's most famous radio voices, Ehrick addresses how Duarte de Perón used changes in pitch, tone, and timbre to negotiate her different roles as melodramatic radio actress, cosmopolitan first lady, and working class urban migrant. Like Kantorowicz's classic *The King's Two Bodies*,⁸ Ehrick's study reveals how radio enabled Eva Duarte to inhabit multiple positions in Peronist populism, and to construct 'Evita' in order to wage powerful political control. Similarly, Ehrick draws on Niní Marshall's sonic caricatures to argue that the comedian's work is an aural anthropology, and a repository of social types that index the changing soundscape of class in language. Unfortunately, unlike with Verma's vast archive, mid-century radio recordings from Argentina and Uruguay are scarce, and thus Ehrick often has to turn to print sources instead of carrying through with the ambitious sonic methodology of her introduction.

However, Ehrick's print archive is impressive, and it allows her to reconstruct not just a remarkably detailed history of female broadcasters and scriptwriters, but also a complex portrait of radio's transnational politics. Recognizing that radio waves travelled easily across the Río de la Plata separating Montevideo and Buenos Aires, Ehrick demonstrates how broadcasters and even programs moved between the two cities in order to create alternative spaces in the airwaves of the *rioplatense* region as political ideologies or commercial and state ownership changed what could be said in broadcasts originating in one country or another. Radio's transnational reach in the region also had global consequences, as the Allied and Axis powers fought to influence politics in the Southern Cone. Thus, Ehrick's book is not only an important contribution to feminist history in Latin American and radio studies more generally, but it points to the urgent need for further studies of the transnational politics of radio.

Fortunately, Damien Keane's extraordinary book also carefully attends to radio's national border crossing. In four intricately argued chapters, Keane traces the links between radio broadcasts from Eamon de Valera, poetry about the radio from Louis Aragon (and that poetry's circulation and retransmission in translations by Louis MacNeice and Patrick Browne), an Irish travelogue about Ethiopia and Mussolini's radio voice, and listening station transcriptions of the Irish writer Francis Stuart's broadcasts from Nazi Germany, in order to situate Ireland as a central node in the mid-century network of cultural shifts underway in Europe, North Africa, and the US during World War II. Radio provides the material grounds for this reorganization of Irish and international culture, as well as the medium that best represents a general unsettling of generic divisions between literature and propaganda, or the autonomous aesthetic and politics. In doing so, Keane argues, radio should be understood as the herald of our own information age.

However, Keane does not celebrate either of these turns as the beginning of ‘free culture’ or the happy resolution to provincial nationalism. As he underscores in his introduction, his is a study of the *problem* of information, and the competing forces that fight to determine, organize, or ‘inform’ linguistic material. As in recent work from Lisa Gitelman and Ben Kafka, Keane has a fine sense for the politics of paperwork, and the bureaucratic power in classifying speech as ‘Irish’, or ‘literature’, or ‘propaganda’. Adamantly historicist, and deeply influenced by the sociology of culture, especially the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Raymond Williams, Keane argues (both with and against Pascale Casanova) for a more dynamic notion of the national and international, focusing on the ‘inter’ in the latter term to reconceptualize the cultural field of late modernism: both the objects that we should include in that field, and its organizing structures. His analysis is remarkable for the ways in which it continually manages to engage Irish writing without dissolving it into cosmopolitan or world literature, nor insulate it through an adamantly nationalist or local reading. Although we do not yet have a name for this critical position panning between the local, diasporic, and transnational, Keane’s resulting practice makes a convincing argument for an ‘Irish’ cultural field that would include W. E. B. Du Bois and the Ethiopian translator of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* alongside Eamon de Valera, as well as a combination of travelogues, broadcasts, and poetry as objects that might equally serve as examples of propaganda or literature. Perhaps most impressive is the rigorous historical contextualization, and rhetorical talent Keane brings to his argument to assure that his dramatic unsettling of so many categories never feels casual, forced, or chaotic.

Although Keane has a careful ear for the sonic politics of broadcasting, *Ireland and the Problem of Information* largely sidesteps sonic analysis, as part of this book’s point is to demonstrate how other media and genres, such as phonograph recordings, novels, broadcast transcriptions, and newspaper writings remediate and thus restructure or differently inform the social meaning and power of radio discourse. In doing so, Keane, in a sympathetic but different fashion than Verma and Ehrick, opens more space for a literary sound studies that would build on the work of Anke Birkenmaier, Timothy Campbell, John Picker, and Jennifer Stoeber to both disturb the boundaries that currently define what counts as literature and literary study, and reimagine the sonic worlds of print.

Notes


1. Alter, “An Art Form Rises”.
2. Williams, *Television*.
3. MacLeish, *The Fall of the City*.
4. Corwin, “We Hold These Truths”.
5. Fletcher, *Sorry, Wrong Number*.
6. Harkness, *Songs of Seoul*.
7. Hilmes, *Radio Voices*; Lacey, *Feminine Frequencies*; Matallana, *Locos por la radio*; Karush, *Culture of Class*.
8. Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies*.

Notes on contributor

Tom McEnaney is assistant professor of Comparative Literature at Cornell University. He has written for *Cultural Critique*, *The Oxford Handbook of Voice Studies*, *Sounding Out!*, *La Habana Elegante*, and *Variaciones Borges*. He is currently completing a manuscript entitled *Acoustic Properties: Radio, Narrative, and the New Neighborhood of the Americas*.

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