Michael DENNING, *Noise Uprising : The Audiopolitics of a World Musical Revolution*

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/volume/5478>

DOI: 10.4000/volume.5478

ISSN: 1950-568X

Publisher

Association Mélanie Seteun

Printed version

Date of publication: 13 December 2017

Number of pages: 208-210

ISBN: 978-2-913169-43-2

ISSN: 1634-5495

Electronic reference

Michael Stewart Foley, "Michael DENNING, *Noise Uprising : The Audiopolitics of a World Musical Revolution*", *Volume !* [Online], 14 : 1 | 2017, Online since 13 December 2017, connection on 15 November 2021.

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/volume/5478> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/volume.5478>

Michael Denning, *Noise Uprising: The Audiopolitics of a World Musical Revolution*, London, Verso, 2015

By Michael S. Foley

In *Noise Uprising*, Michael Denning shows why he is by now regarded as a giant in the fields of American studies and cultural studies. Denning recovers the sound and politics of a global “musical revolution” waged over just five or six years in the late 1920s. His central claim is that the early studio recordings of vernacular musicians from all over the world served as a vehicle, as well as a low-rumbling catalyst, for a political revolution: the global uprising against colonialism.

Denning’s argument is sufficiently audacious at first glance that one could be forgiven for greeting it with skepticism. But then he presents evidence from a breathtaking range of vernacular music—son, hula, tango, kroncong, samba, blues, tarab, jazz, palm-wine, huangse yinyue—made and recorded in cities all over the planet—Rio, Honolulu, Accra, Shanghai, Jakarta, Manila, Saigon, New Orleans, Buenos Aires and Montevideo, Havana, Lisbon, Zanzibar, Cape Town, among others. By the time he is done, the skepticism has passed. It may not be a perfect book, but it is hard not to be in awe of the intellect and ambition behind it.

The technological advances that helped spark this musical revolution will be well-known to readers of this journal, but that is only part of the story. As Denning notes, the vernacular music recorded to 78 rpm shellac discs and played on phonograph machines was not new music; it was old music captured and disseminated by a new technology. That is, these new, modern recordings circulated for the first time the true voices of the masses (unlike, say, modern art or literature which merely represented those voices) (4).

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In approaching music in this way, Denning follows somewhat the paths blazed by historians of the book, newspapers, the post office, and other systems of information distribution, except that in this case, the medium was sound (or “noise,” as critics, offended by the instruments, timbres, and syncopation, saw it). And this sound was distributed via a network of colonial ports. In the decades before these recordings were made, of course, millions of migrants had moved to these port cities, and they brought with them their own “subaltern musical cultures.”

Consequently, Denning shows, “the songs and dances of vernacular phonograph music, musics for distraction, were the first great medium that articulated and constituted ‘everyday life,’ the world of ‘consumption’ beyond the workplace.” (9) Here, Denning follows not only Bourdieu’s ideas about everyday life but also Josh Kun’s “audiotopias,” by defining vernacular music as creating territorial and temporal markers, “keeping time through the rhythmic reordering of daily life.” (11) It is, at root, an analysis of subcultures-as-prefigurative politics. In other words, Denning writes, “the organization of social order,” of “creating social space and social solidarity,” depended in part on this new organization of sound. “Music did not simply sustain the soul in the struggle” against colonialism; “the decolonization of the territory,” he argues in his most daring claim, “was made possible by the decolonization of the ear.” (9-10)

It may be daring, but Denning is careful, too, to point out that vernacular recordings, even if they “carried no apparent political meaning,” contributed to this process. In

the book’s most compelling passage, Denning argues that

“their disruptive noise challenged not only the musical codes of empires and racial supremacy, but also the improving and uplifting ideologies of many colonial elites. And their embodiment of the commonplaces of daily life in the colonial ports gave them hidden meanings... As they reverberated across the archipelago of colonial ports, they came to figure the utopian promise of decolonization itself, heralding a Third World.” (140)

Here, Denning turns the meaning of “Third World” on its head, essentially swapping the term for “Another World is Possible.”

It is difficult for us to imagine, today, the decolonizing of the ear, Denning acknowledges, because we cannot recreate the historical moment when the sound of these newly available vernacular songs seemed truly new. He labors mightily to analyze the reception of “noisy” timbres, syncopated rhythms, “weird” tonalities, and recorded improvisation that shocked so many (including the likes of Theodor Adorno). In doing so, he draws on his own analysis of the recordings (and many liner notes for original or later releases), as well as on the work of scholars who specialize in each type of music. Most important, however, Denning makes use of a wide array of publications from the 1920s, some quite obscure, in which he finds contemporary response—often expressing shock and bewilderment—to these new musics.

It would be easy to dismiss the early rise of the phonograph record as mere capitalist cooptation of the vernacular and, in fact, Denning does well to uncover a rapidly developing culture attuned to the analysis (in

record reviews, for example) and consumption of phonograph records. But this was no simple cooptation. The ear was decolonized by musicians who came from “the same milieu as the young anticolonial activists,” Denning observes. Like the activists, the artists were frequently intercolonial migrants, living in colonial ports and serving as “mediators between the establishments of the local elites and the plebeian quarters.” (151) Placed in that light, the musicians are more easily seen as cultural guerrillas, an advance party for the uprising masses to come. But the connection between the decolonization of the ear and political decolonization, if plausible, remains elusive. There is no question that in some places, vernacular music provided a soundtrack for liberation from colonial rule; but Denning falls short of proving that the recording and distribution of this music, with its unconventional noise and rhythm, was, in effect, a precondition for decolonization.

His ambition to tell this story of vernacular genres from all over the world is impressive, particularly when one supposes that he could have focused on a single continent or even a single port as a case study. At the same time, the constant hopping around from one place to another, one vernacular form to another—a necessary byproduct of his approach—at times grows exhausting. For each global generalization, Denning provides example after example of the same thing happening in many different places (many sentences begin with “In [insert name of port city]...”) at roughly the same time. But maybe such criticism is unfair; it would be difficult, after all, to find an alternative way to present the evidence from all over the world that is needed to prove his argument.

If I have one complaint it is that Denning holds back from applying his thesis to other contexts. Particularly as we now see neoliberalism responsible for the dispossession of cities by nouveau colonizers—gentrifiers, tech bros, and their colonial administrators in City Hall—one craves comment from the author. This relentless colonization of cultural capitals—from San Francisco to London, Cape Town to Berlin, Vancouver to Buenos Aires—is not new, of course, and it has been met, time and again, by local musical uprisings from punks and hip-hop artists, among others. Should we view these as heralds of a coming political revolution against neoliberal urban policy makers? Do we dare hope for a decolonization of the ear 2.0, disseminated not by phonograph, steamship and telegraph but by mp3, satellite and social media? In short, what lessons may we draw for our own times? We are left to ponder these questions on our own.

Such minor frustrations aside, this is a book that should be read by anyone interested in the transformative power of music. Just as the commitment of vernacular music to 78 rpm discs modeled decolonization to the colonized, Denning’s book is a model to follow for others interested in the intersection of music and politics.