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State of Ambiguity

Palmer, Steven

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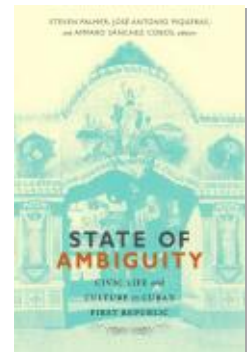
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CHAPTER 9



El naciente público oyente

Toward a Genealogy of the Audience in Early Republican Cuba

Alejandra Bronfman

Histories of the Cuban media dub the 1940s and 1950s the golden age of broadcasting. Rather than echoing broad historiographic currents emphasizing profound corruption or failure to build democratic institutions, they note instead a pervasive soundscape replete with telenovelas, star announcers, music, news, and political commentary. Cubans organized their days so as to catch programs featuring the Chinese detective Chan-Li Po, the charismatic and loquacious spiritist Clavelito, and the beloved, fiery critic of political corruption, Eddy Chibas.¹ Local programs also regulated leisure hours in smaller cities and towns, as attested to by Sunday afternoons characterized by empty streets and synchronized receivers.² Broadcast listening shaped many of the rhythms and practices of sociability in Cuban everyday life.

The success of Cuban broadcasting extended beyond national borders. As Yeidy Rivero observes, Havana came to be the “media capital of Latin America” during this period. Not only were some of the genres such as telenovelas generated in Cuba widely popular all across the region but, as Rivero convincingly argues, the degree of “technical, advertising, and creative” expertise in Cuba’s sophisticated broadcasting industry, which by the 1950s included television as well as radio, had been exported and circulated throughout the region.³ Havana’s prominent position in the region as the source of expertise and programming had, argues Rivero, a lasting impact on Latin American mediascapes.

Cuba’s informative and entertaining radio histories proceed quickly from the introduction of broadcasting to the ubiquity of

soaps, jingles, and stars, pausing only briefly on an array of experiments, practices, and debates that shaped that transformation. By assuming a public, they take for granted what, as Bruno Latour might argue, needs to be explained.⁴ This essay poses a central question: how did a public for broadcasting come into being in republican Havana, and what are the conditions by which it emerged? How did an *audience* grow? As actors in the dramatic political processes of the Republican period, the media and its public merit further consideration. When broadcasting was introduced in Cuba in the 1920s, as we shall see, the audience was mostly elsewhere. That the medium and a local public would become two parts of what we identify as “radio” was not a foregone conclusion.

Thinking about media when they were new counters the appearance of inevitability and naturalness that media take on once they have become ubiquitous. Lingering on initial moments of uncertainty and instability allows for a deeper understanding of, as noted by Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey Pingree, “how interpretive communities are built or destroyed, how normative epistemologies emerge.”⁵ I argue here that a public attuned to the particularities of early radio in Cuba did not exist prior to broadcasting but rather materialized in the context of economic and political circumstances in the republican era. As proposed by Carolyn Marvin, histories of media must include an array of users. Along with consumers, it is crucial to take into account entrepreneurs and technicians who policed the boundaries of use, meanings, and purpose as systems of communication began to take shape. Marvin argued eloquently for a decentering of technological histories, away from the progression of different machines and toward the discursive contexts in which they were created.⁶ Here I draw from Gitelman and Pingree, Marvin, and Latour to get at the question of the composition of a public. I propose that the machines assembled a public at the same time that people assembled machines. The public and the machines can be understood as artifacts of mutual invention. But this was an incomplete, uneven process. The transposition of broadcasting to early Republican Cuba did not call forth a homogeneous “mass” audience. Rather, from its inception, it assembled a fractured, critical, and skeptical public. The excesses and leftovers remained as counterpublics and a variety of noisy machines that disrupted the sound of mainstream broadcasting.⁷

What difference does sound make? The medium in question reproduced and transmitted sound over long distances, extending the range of the voice and of the ear. Contemporary observers expressed wonder at the capacity of wireless to shrink distances and meditated on the possibilities for new com-

munities and the destabilization of seemingly incontrovertible categories like space and time.⁸ But if commentators marveled at utopian possibilities, they remained paradoxically silent about the actual sounds emanating from the machines, evincing a problematic distance between the promise of instant and clear communication and the reality of beeps, whistles, rasps, crackles, and blips, along with the occasional tones of human voices or musical instruments. I would suggest, however, that the appeal of clarity and seemingly unmediated sound as eventually proposed by manufacturers of radio sets obscures a much more ecumenical approach by early listeners. The people listening to their machines did not demand smooth, clear reception at the onset of broadcasting. It was only later that the demand for clarity of sound came to shape a public with specific parameters of social status as well as with particular expectations and practices. In so doing it marginalized other kinds of listening practices and relationships with machines. My intention here is to remain attuned to the exigencies and limits of the aural, but the methodological challenge of doing a history of sound with written texts remains. For the moment these and visual representations of the machines themselves are my sources.

New Machines

What apparatus serves as a point of entry for a history of radio in Cuba? Perhaps it was the telephone, introduced in 1859 as a machine that could receive and transmit sound, especially voices. Since the telephone was intended to provide crucial information to commercial enterprises, it fits neatly into broader narratives centered on empire and technology. A second version might begin with the stations assembled and owned by amateur radio operators, who in the early twentieth century used those stations to send or receive shortwave signals. Such a beginning would privilege individuals rather than state or corporate actors and place more emphasis on informal transnational connections rather than national boundaries in the making of radio.

There is a third beginning: October 10, 1922. At 4 P.M. President Zayas spoke into a microphone first in English and then in Spanish. A series of musical performances followed his speech. The program was aimed at the United States, but also at those in Cuba with the technology to receive broadcasts.⁹ This beginning might be understood not as a beginning at all but rather as the moment in which the stories of the telephone and the amateurs come together and, in so doing, confound simpler interpretations of communications technologies as either wholly controlled by imperial, capitalist interests or predominantly in the hands of scattered individuals. The radio

station from which Zayas spoke, PWX, was built by the Cuban Telephone Company, an offshoot of International Telephone and Telegraph, and it transmitted via telephone line to its sister station, WEAJ in New York, which in turn broadcast within its range. Relative to the expense and labor involved in the construction of this station, listeners were few. One hundred manufactured receivers were dispersed throughout Cuba. In the days before the PWX broadcast, General Electric and Westinghouse had distributed another forty receivers to government employees. On October 10, they opened the doors of their store so that passersby could listen.¹⁰ Any remaining listeners would have been those “amateurs” who had acquired or built their own equipment and for the first time would have been able to tune in to a broadcast from the island itself rather than from across the ocean.

It is worth remembering that Cuba was at that moment emerging from a recent economic catastrophe, in which the price of sugar, buoyed by several years of high demand as a result of war in Europe, plummeted dramatically in 1921. During the war, foreign investment, particularly from the United States, had grown substantially. Twenty-five new sugar mills had been built between 1914 and 1920, raising the volume of sugar produced and bolstering wages for workers. After sugar prices crashed, the prosperity in evidence since 1915 was suddenly at risk, as banks failed, businesses closed, and unemployment grew.¹¹

As many historians have observed, the economic crisis spurred a political crisis for the Zayas administration, as urban and rural workers mobilized when confronted with sudden deprivation relative to the past decade. At the same time, students, intellectuals, and veterans framed their protests with a critique of the corrupt relationship with the United States and a lack of sovereignty. Revisiting Zayas’s opening speech with this in mind suggests that he was at once lauding technological modernity in an effort to bolster fading legitimacy and making explicit the connection to the United States, perhaps against growing criticisms of his administration.

Thus sonic technologies made their appearance in Havana amid uncertain economic conditions and increasingly vocal expressions of discontent with a political system that many saw as corrupt and demeaning. One of the results of this dual crisis was a shift in political practices that entailed, as Gillian McGillivray and Robert Whitney have argued, efforts to incorporate popular mobilizations into electoral politics and in reformulated nationalist discourses. As in other parts of Latin America, the “people” was constituted as a political actor with varying degrees of force and influence.¹²

With the advantages of hindsight, it seems relatively straightforward to

make the connection between interlocutors looking for a medium and a medium looking for an audience. As facilitator to a regime looking for ways to harness and control a politicized “people” as well as for an opposition looking to disseminate its messages of dissent, the place of a medium like radio seems clear, especially given what we know of radio’s eventual role. But none of it was obvious to people at the time.

El Naciente Público Oyente

Cubans were not strangers to listening. Across socioeconomic status, modes of sociability included gatherings centered around aural communications. As Marial Iglesias has argued, public festivals were integral to the construction of a nationalist sentiment in the aftermath of colonialism. These included civic and religious processions, *mítins*, commemorations, and funerals. In the streets and plazas of urban centers, the collective listening to music, songs, and speeches that took place during these rituals helped Cubans negotiate the complex transitions from Spanish rule to North American tutelage with a modicum of autonomy. Particularly in a context in which illiteracy predominated, collective aural experiences proved significant to any attempts to elaborate nationalist hegemonies. These were produced and consumed by diverse groups, including Afro-Cubans whose drumming sessions came to be a site of contestation over the meaning of civilization and modernity.¹³

Listening publics had also formed in enclosed spaces. Araceli Tinajero has traced the tradition of reading aloud that came to characterize many cigar factories in Cuba, the United States, and other parts of the Caribbean. Stretching back to the nineteenth century, readers became a fixture on factory floors, offering entertainment and information to thousands of workers. They were paid by the workers themselves and most commonly read newspapers and novels for up to four hours a day. The workforce, which Tinajero argues was ethnically diverse and tended to the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum, became an expectant and informed listening public whose interests ranged, apparently, from news of politics and sports events to canonical authors like Cervantes, Victor Hugo, and Dickens.¹⁴ The elite also had listening spaces, such as the opera house and concert hall. As attested to by the theaters and concert halls built in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these were popular pastimes among the bourgeoisie seeking the trappings of distinction in a fluid social context. More recently, the phonograph had made an appearance, rendering living room and parlors listening spaces in a few exclusive homes.

But this rich, diverse, and sophisticated culture of listening did not immediately take up the radio as its next object of interest. In the early years, listening to a box played on different desires and expectations than going to a concert, attending a rally, or taking in a novel over the course of a workweek at a cigar factory. Initially, the medium's appeal was more associated with the machines themselves than with its potential to convey sound to large numbers of people. The most prominent machines that transmitted sound were telephones. By 1888, the Spanish colonial regime had created a telephone network with thirty-four kilometers of lines and one thousand five hundred subscribers. In the wake of the U.S. occupations (1898–1902 and 1906–9), U.S. capital, which had provided the initial financing, took greater control and created the Cuban Telephone Company. The brothers Hernand and Sosthenes Behn subsequently bought this and added it to their growing telecommunications empire, International Telephone and Telegraph. By 1916, Havana had 5 telephones per 100 inhabitants, which was half that of New York, but three times that of Madrid. In 1921, Havana and Key West were connected with the first overseas (or undersea) telephone cables, allowing for speedier communications among the growing capitalist enterprises in Cuba and the United States. Because of the financial relationships, Havana and New York were linked via telephone sooner than New York and other parts of the United States.¹⁵ If one were to map access to sonic media, boundaries of wealth, infrastructure, investment patterns, and urban space would matter more than national boundaries.

Wireless radio sets appeared soon after World War I and seem to have taken their place alongside telephones as the most recent development in long-distance communications. The medium worked for two-way or point-to-point communication. It was suited to bits of information at best and, if not entirely reliable, was exciting for the possibilities of communicating electronically over great distances. A series of men—all men as far as I can tell—became fascinated with the equipment and its possibilities and began to build or buy stations to operate privately. This world of amateurs or hobbyists existed as a more diffuse network already engaged with the emergent technologies prior to the Cuban Telephone Company's efforts to expand to broadcasting. In the United States, many amateurs were boys or middle-class men, relegated to their basements, tinkering late at night or on the weekends, forming associations with other amateurs and exchanging messages mostly about the fact that they could exchange messages.¹⁶ But in Cuba and throughout the Caribbean, those who could afford the equipment tended to be wealthy and established. Often they were planters or sponsored by planters who used the ability to communicate to serve their business interests.¹⁷

These amateurs and their stories have made a scant impression in published texts. Rather, their presence emerges on the Internet, as part of what is becoming an extensive alternative history of radio. Luis Casas Romero is remembered as both a military man who had fought in Cuba's Wars of Independence and as a musician who founded and directed the Banda Infantil de Camaguey. He built station 2LC in Havana in 1920 and transmitted Cuba's first radio signals in August 1922. Casas began his broadcast with the cannon shot fired from La Cabana every night at 9 P.M., followed by a weather report. According to Lázaro David Najarro Pujol, the programming, initially directed at "aficionades radioemisores"—in other words, other amateur broadcasters—was eventually directed at the "naciente público oyente" invoking a recently incarnated entity, the "hearing public."¹⁸

Other amateurs included Manuel Alvarez, who built a station in Caibaren, Las Villas, and Frank Jones, an electrical engineer employed by the sugar industry who built a station that opened in early 1922, broadcasting from Central Tuinucú.¹⁹ The contemporary press reports that F. W. Morton and Humberto Giquel also operated stations at the opening of PWX.²⁰ Yet another to lay claim to originating wireless communications was Frank Butler, chief assistant to Lee De Forest, who, at the behest of the U.S. Navy, established a wireless station in Guantánamo as early as 1905. By his own telling, this was a dangerous and unpredictable adventure, complete with panthers, convicted killers hired as assistants, explosions, and an earthquake. But it was also a successful venture that culminated in the completion of one of five stations planned by the navy during this period.²¹ It is possible that in this moment there were as many producers of sound as consumers. The traditional narrative that begins with the Cuban Telephone Company's PWX broadcast in 1922 obscures this existing sonic culture fed by machines, people, and knowledge.

Cuba's nascent listening public in all likelihood included those with links to this economy, as interested parties seem to have been more likely to build, rather than purchase, their own receivers. A newspaper column entitled "Radiotelefonía" inaugurated shortly following the October PWX broadcast, and written by J. M. Baquero, announced early on that since General Electric and Westinghouse sold sets at such prohibitive prices, it would dedicate much of its column space to dispensing advice about building receivers.²² According to Baquero, anyone with access to a cigar box, some tin foil, a telephone, and a few other household items (as well as his informative instructions) could construct a set that would receive broadcasts.²³ The many letters and responses posted in subsequent columns, full of questions about

antennae or the merits of different kinds of wire, suggest that many readers became builders, rather than purchasers, of radios.

By December 1922, commentators witnessed listening throughout the city: a walk on a concert night revealed inhabitants attuned to radios in elite and modest residences, grouped in clusters in a bicycle shop or sharing one set of headphones among six people.²⁴ But what were they listening to? Programs were intermittent and either without clear direction or extremely specific. On Wednesdays and Saturdays, from 8:30 until 10:30 P.M., PWX broadcast “programas musicales, discursos en español.” Humberto Giquel’s station also began with the 9 P.M. cannon shot and offered Havanans the weather forecast for the following twenty-four hours.²⁵ If listeners were lucky and particularly adept at tuning their receivers, they might receive programming from the United States, Canada, or even further afield. In November, PWX broadcast the proceedings of the American Medical Congress, which was deemed a success and prompted a reflection about the nature of programming. Why, asked Baquero, were there no broadcasts of the opera, or of religious services, or meetings of other social organizations?²⁶ The evidence suggests that the nature of broadcasting took shape much more slowly than the dissemination of technical knowledge about these machines. From this perspective, programming seems an afterthought rather than the main attraction. At the onset, radio as a medium lacked a clear purpose regarding the services it might provide, the parameters of time and taste, and the demographics and interests of anticipated audiences. Thus broadcasting did not insert itself into existing listening practices but rather hovered on the margins, seeking ways to make itself relevant despite considerable technical constraints.

Indeed, absent from discussions of early radio is an overwhelming demand to settle on a fixed format. Radio in this early incarnation appealed precisely because it held out the possibility of receiving noise from other parts of the world. Listeners were pleasantly surprised, perhaps, but certainly did not require that what they heard make sense or provide sustained information or entertainment, or that it dispense up-to-date news regarding sports matches, political events, or natural catastrophes. All of that would come later. In the beginning, radio appealed precisely because it could access and sonically represent the fragmented and dispersed nature of the world—this medium, much more than others that preceded it, gave the impression of transparency.²⁷ The ether, replete with all sorts of noise, could be captured. As commentator Julian Power of *Carteles* put it, radio sounded like this: “Celeste Aida . . . oiga, quitese de la linea . . . ik, ik, ik . . . Celeste Ai . . . brrrr.

. . . Station KKK? . . . Toc-toc-toc . . . señores y señoras, va a cantar Sylvia. . . ik, ik, ik . . . you, my baby flapper. . . tratachín, tratachín . . . jabon de reuter! . . . toc, toc . . . ese melyto, a la reja . . . solo de violín por.”²⁸ If Power evinced exasperation with this as a listening experience, he positioned himself as an outsider and critic of the mainstream. I suggest that the growing appeal of radio drew from its capacity to offer access to far-flung domains of sound. Perhaps, for some, what was exciting and really new was not that they might receive cohesive and easily audible concerts from across town but rather that they might, on some clear evening, find themselves listening to bits of a boxing match or a weather report from hundreds of miles away.

The machines remained the center of attention and drew dispersed groups into association with one another. Cubans spent a great deal of energy trying to figure out which machine to use, which one to build, and how many ways to use it. In newspapers and publications, diagrams mapped out the way bits of wire, coils, cardboard, and metal could be put together in the most efficient fashion. Marked with neat numbers and labels for each of the parts, the bird’s-eye and three-quarter views rendered the machines both impressive and accessible, bound to succeed, because of their complexity, and possible to assemble with a modicum of determination. The listener this machine called forth was self-sufficient, competent, and attentive to precision and detail. Having a radio was not so much about entertainment as about being part of a mechanically minded, electrically literate community. The diagrams, the worrying about antennae, and the anxiety about translated manuals suggest that the machines held out an allure perhaps even distinct from their function. Part of the fascination derived from the tactile, palpable connection to this invention.²⁹

So an audience was beginning to take shape, interested in making its own equipment and trolling both for regular broadcasts and for random and distant noises captured by their antennae. At the same time, the presence of these machines gave rise to an assortment of other occupations and pre-occupations. The vendors, the “radio-doctors,” writers, commentators, and instructors formed part of a cluster of people and activities centered on the equipment. Jorge González, of the signal marine corps, found a new market for his skills when he became an instructor at the new Academia de Radio-telefonía. Cuba’s Department of Communications opened its own academy, requiring both instructors and students. And translators were busy producing Spanish-language versions of books on radio.³⁰ The machines spawned a collection of people concerned with how to explain their function, how to keep them working, how to use them in different ways, and how to sell them.

The rise of broadcasters and performers may in fact have been preceded by and depended on the community of mechanics, engineers, publishers, and pedagogues this medium supported.³¹

Receivers, as machines that emitted entertaining or informative programming, were among many apparatuses introduced during this period. Alongside stories about the growing broadcasting industry, magazines like *Carteles* and *Social* featured articles that predicted an array of uses for the transmission and recording of sound. From abroad came the story of linguistic work in progress by John Harrington of the Smithsonian Institute and William Gates, director of the National Museum in Guatemala. Their use of the “palofotófono” to record the speech of a Guatemalan Indian named Cipriano Alvarado, who had been “found in the mountains and completely ignorant of civilization,” promised to be the key to unlocking the secrets of Mayan Quiché. This device, recently invented by Charles Hoxie at General Electric, apparently reproduced images of words on film, thus, according to the authors, allowing for a detailed analysis of tone, inflection, and nonverbal sounds. Where previous efforts to record guttural and laryngeal sounds had failed, the palofotófono promised to further the ambitions of linguists in search of pure samples of a disappeared language. The scientists had recorded Alvarado telling the Maya creation story and broadcast it over the radio, giving audiences “an opportunity to listen to a disappearing language.”³² As Jonathan Sterne has pointed out, an initial impetus for the development of recording technology was a developing interest in preservation of bodies. In the wake of the U.S. Civil War, medical and scientific knowledge devoted some attention to preserving dead bodies for scientific research. The possibility of preserving voices, especially of the soon to be dead, spurred experimentation in recording technologies.³³ Anthropologists working in the 1920s made the leap from recording vanishing voices to the desire to record vanishing languages. Linguistic dictionaries enjoyed long-standing status as an indispensable tool for anthropologists. The use of recording devices seemed a logical next step. These machines would assist them in their endeavors to capture dying sounds and allow (skeptical?) listeners to witness their work.³⁴

From London came the account of another technological breakthrough. Engineers were working on the “vidoscopo,” a device that would allow for the broadcasting of visual as well as sonic material. So, imagined the author, people sitting in the comfort of their homes would be able to view a film simultaneously to its showing in New York or London or anywhere else in the world. When this happened, the “emoción estética de los fanáticos

del radio,” already giddy with the radio broadcasts of opening nights at the Apollo Theater, would surely expand and send audiences into new ecstatic heights.³⁵ This and another potential invention, the phonofilm, pursued the possibility of marrying visual and sound recordings. Lee De Forest, responsible for this latest of several attempts, claimed that the best use for this would be for dance numbers, but the journalist reporting on these inventions projected other uses, such as the recording and broadcasting of educational lectures. He also imagined this as a link to the dead, citing De Forest’s lament that the technology hadn’t been invented in time to record the great speeches of Abraham Lincoln or Theodore Roosevelt.³⁶ These machines promised the creation of memory and an archive. In their presence, the future was imagined as one that could hold on more precisely to the past. But they remained fantasies from abroad as Cubans continued to fiddle with their homemade equipment and rely on radio in public spaces as their principal source of electronically transmitted sound.

Buy Buy Buy

Such an anti-consumerist engagement with radio proved frustrating to General Electric and Westinghouse executives, whose own projections had included profits from purchases of receivers. Advertising was not yet a major generator of income, and Cuba did not require the licensing of receivers, as in Great Britain.³⁷ The companies, whose expansion into Latin America had been premised on growing profits in the face of continuing economic difficulties, embarked on a concerted effort to persuade Cubans to buy new receiving sets.³⁸

Given the high cost and the unproven nature of the machines themselves, the General Electric and Westinghouse campaigns involved appealing to expectations of gender and class. Marketing strategies included persuading potential buyers that receivers were easy to use, attractive, and would foster sophisticated renewed social relations. Steve Wurtzler’s work on marketing of receivers in the United States has demonstrated the ways that manufacturers worked to transform equipment from apparatuses worthy of garages or basements to pieces of furniture appropriate for living rooms and parlors.³⁹ A similar logic seems to have been at work in Cuba, as demonstrated by the advertisements populating the pages of *Carteles* and *Social*, publications that served as one of Havana’s principal arbiters of bourgeois taste. One General Electric ad promises that listeners will “dance with radio,” offering the appeal of dancing in one’s own home to the best music coming “from Chicago or New York.”⁴⁰ A drawing of well-dressed couples waltzing on a veranda of



Figure 9.1 General Electric ad: “Before going to sleep, Pepito and Bebita listen to a story transmitted by their grandfather from New York or Chicago.” *Carteles*, January 1923.

what seems to be a large house suggests that the receiver’s proper place is in the homes and entertainments of the wealthy. The radio could turn a home or a veranda into a privatized version of a concert hall or a dance floor.

Other ads promoted the receivers’ simplicity. Itself simple, the ad included a line drawing of a receiver, accompanied by the claim that it would receive all the concerts broadcast from the United States.⁴¹ Continuing with this theme, some ads included images of tuned-in children, simultaneously touting the possibilities of strengthening family ties, fostering cosmopolitan attitudes, and operating accessible technologies: “Pepito y Bebita, antes de dormir, oyen un cuento que desde Chicago o New York, les transmite su abuelito.”⁴² RCA promoted its receivers in a similar manner. Assurances to potential buyers included clarity of sound and reception from great distances (always the United States, in these ads) without static. They also claimed simplicity and affordability, the latter somewhat undermined by the drawings of elegantly dressed young women gathered around a receiver in a well-appointed parlor. It seemed to matter little that they neglected to explain the array of machines with specialized names: the “Radiola Super-Heterodyne” and “Radiola Regenoflex” were promoted as equally easy to use and effective.⁴³ The appeal was to be part of a transnational audience. They were selling a relationship with the United States as much as an apparatus.

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Ud. necesita la Victrola**

La mejor música del mundo es verdaderamente sublime sólo cuando está interpretada en la forma adecuada.

La mejor música del mundo está interpretada en los Discos Victor por los artistas más famosos del mundo. La Victrola es el único instrumento hecho especialmente para tocar los Discos Victor. Usados conjuntamente, la Victrola y los Discos Victor le brindan la oportunidad de poder disfrutar lo mejor que hay en materia de música, interpretado por los mejores artistas.

Hay Victrolas en una gran variedad de modelos, de \$25 a \$1500. Escribanos solicitando los catálogos Victor.

Victrola
Mfg. by the Victor Talking Machine Company, Camden, N. J., U. S. A.

Victrola No. 200
\$250
Victrola No. 300 Electric \$300
Cable, Radio & Phon.

Victor
"LA VOZ DEL MONDO"
THE TALKING MACHINE COMPANY

Victor Talking Machine Company, Camden, N. J., U. S. A.

Figure 9.2 Victrola ad: "To listen to the best music, you need Victrola." *Social*, November 1924.

Against the emerging and existing practices of listening in the street or in public places, or of constructing equipment and searching for an esoteric variety of emanations from multiple locations, RCA and General Electric waged a campaign to promote listening that took place inside homes (particularly those that could afford to buy their apparatuses), by young women, couples, or families, to concerts or other programs broadcast from the United States. The acquisition of manufactured radio sets moved spaces of electronically mediated listening from the street to the home, from a male-occupied nook or closet to a female-dominated shared living space. The public that GE, Westinghouse, and RCA hoped to foster was enclosed in private space and reliant on a commercial company for their entertainment. It was a public that sought cosmopolitan connections in the comfort of their home, enjoyed regular diversions at regular intervals that might move easily from consuming the machines to consuming that which the machines told them to buy, and that would integrate new technologies into traditional rituals of courtship, childrearing, or conviviality.

But street listening persisted, taking on new dimensions. In March 1923,



Figure 9.3 A fifteen-foot loudspeaker. *Carteles*, October 1924.

Humberto Giquel mounted a radio and loudspeaker on a car and presented it at carnival, during which the car, draped in flags and paper flowers, paraded the streets. Photographs denote the curiosity of onlookers, falling perhaps short of bedazzlement, but certainly indicating the novelty of the “radio-auto.”⁴⁴ Just as Havana expanded from its older urban core and more cars began to appear in the streets, Giquel linked sound with mobility as a new mode of inhabiting urban space.⁴⁵ The loudspeakers themselves were worthy of putting on display, as in the exhibit of a giant loudspeaker with a woman perched on top (see figure 9.3). Underscoring the new commodification of sound, the ad jokingly denied the commodification of women—asserting that though the loudspeaker was for sale, its model was not.⁴⁶ As the “magician of the twentieth century,” electronically broadcast sound inspired inventors and entrepreneurs to generate an array of uses. It might expand and fuel the entertainment industry, generate and fulfill consumer demands, or fill urban spaces with (more) noise.⁴⁷ This pleased some observers and irritated others.

El Octopus Acústico

According to some critics, rather than integrating smoothly into practices of social reproduction or contributing to the pleasures of public space, the radio wrought destruction and disrupted the rhythms of family life. As energetically as it was declared the magician of the twentieth century, radio was condemned on a number of fronts. Critics bemoaned the dangers to both nation and psyches. Julio Power understood radio as science gone awry, taking on a life of its own and producing overwhelming, unbearable quantities of noise: “el monstruo ubicuo . . . perturba la paz del universo.” The noise posed multiple dangers, among them that of imperialism—not only were Cubans now condemned to hear more English than they ever wanted, once emissions from Europe or China increased, the cacophony would send Cubans straight to the insane asylum. The apocalypse would come to fruition eventually, with increasing rates of deafness and states battling for airwaves. Only then would a new, sensible silence reign.⁴⁸ In the context of rising critiques of imperialism and perceived threats to national autonomy, the radio served as a reminder of the fragility of sonic boundaries. There was no defense against the aural violation of national borders.

Another danger, according to Power, was a radical transformation of daily life, including the enjoyment of other entertainments. No one used cameras or phonographs anymore, and attendance had declined at live performances. The radio had driven everyone inside, he argued, vacating once lively streets and plazas in favor of the ironically described “cajita mágica y radiosa.” And public space would be newly filled with the “jinete satánico”: advertising. He composed a scenario in which loudspeakers mounted in plazas and street corners would peddle Gillette soap, Bayer aspirin, and El Gaitero cider. Urban centers had already become tremendously noisy, he observed apocalyptically, so much so that those seeking a quiet existence would have to spend their lives in airplanes.⁴⁹

Alberto Guigou also announced the death of traditional social rituals. Drawing a sharper distinction between public and private space, he announced a reign of silence in public accompanying the turn inward to domestic broadcasting. Suffering from the “morbo auditivo,” people put on their headphones and neglected cards, chess, conversation, or books in favor of the radio broadcast. This had thrown families into disarray, as children turned away from their grandmothers’ bedtime stories or refused to go to bed. But courtship suffered most of all. No more furtive kisses on the sofa, no more lingering conversations, no more kisses blown from windows. Moreover, the radio had introduced conflict, as couples bickered over musical

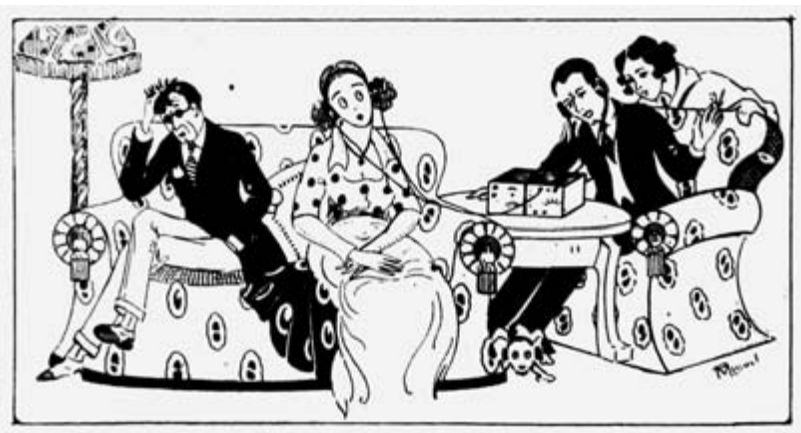


Figure 9.4 "Radio and Love," by Alberto Guigou. *Carteles*, May 1923.

tastes, or young women worked in vain to wrest their lovers from the tentacles of the "octopus acústico."⁵⁰

If these observers agreed that the radio disrupted and corroded social practices, they disagreed as to how it had affected communal space: while one insisted on an increasingly noisy soundscape in the street, the other emphasized an eerily silent and deserted city. At risk were traditional family structures. And in contention was the use of public space. Newly mobilized political communities had not yet harnessed broadcasting to their purposes. But worries and uncertainties about the capacities of radio to transform space, and the practice of politics along with it, seem to be driving much of this commentary. As R. Murray Schafer observed, there is no ear lid, and the capacity of these new machines to produce sound that could not be shut off or ignored fed these writers' anxieties.⁵¹ Not only were families, couples, and pocketbooks at risk; the radio called into question, and therefore put in danger, the very boundaries of communities and of selves.

An Assembled Audience

Despite their positions on opposite sides of the moral divide with regard to radio, both the critics and the advocates point to a process of what Latour would call a reassembly.⁵² Radio reorganized groups of people, bringing them into contact with one another and reconfiguring forms of sociability. Electrical engineers, corporate executives, young women, journalists, advertising agencies, and aspiring broadcasters all came to have a stake in sonic technologies and the process by which they would become part of daily Havanan life. Responding to an initial context of ambulatory listening and con-

sumers that preferred tinkering over buying, private capital worked to create a listening audience in private, domestic, moneyed spaces. Listeners grew accustomed to designing aural schedules, demanding clarity of sound, and regarding emanations from long distances as normal occurrences. Amateurs remained outside and on the margins of the tightening bonds between capital and broadcasting, but they did not disappear. Changing configurations of wires, machines, microphones, transmitters, and receivers conjured people to make, fix, listen to, and buy them. An audience had come into being.

Notes

1. González, *Llorar es un placer*; López, *La radio en Cuba*.
2. “Dos años de un programa radial: *Lo que pasa en Pinar del Río* lo escucha el 97% de oyentes,” in *Pinar del Río: El órgano oficial del Comité Todo por Pinar del Río* 1, no. 4 (August 1947).
3. Rivero, “Havana as a 1940s–1950s Latin American Media Capital,” 277.
4. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*.
5. Gitelman and Pingree, “Introduction: What’s New about New Media?,” xv.
6. Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New*. See also Sterne, *The Audible Past*.
7. Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*; Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*.
8. See, for example, Arnheim, *Radio*.
9. *La Discusión*, October 11, 1922, 1, 8. López, *La radio en Cuba*; González, *Llorar es un placer*.
10. González, *Llorar es un placer*, 89–90.
11. McGillivray, *Blazing Cane*; Pérez, *Cuba under the Platt Amendment*; Whitney, *State and Revolution in Cuba*; Commission on Cuban Affairs, *Problems of the New Cuba*; Chapman, *A History of the Cuban Republic*.
12. McGillivray, *Blazing Cane*; Whitney, *State and Revolution in Cuba*.
13. Iglesias Utset, *Las metáforas del cambio*; Rosenthal, “Spectacle, Fear, and Protest”; Bronfman, *Measures of Equality*; Moore, *Nationalizing Blackness*; Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists*.
14. Tinajero, *El Lector*.
15. Altshuler and Díaz, eds., *El teléfono en Cuba*; Pérez Salomón, *Cuba: 125 años de telefonía*; O’Brien, *The Revolutionary Mission*.
16. Haring, *Ham Radio’s Technical Culture*.
17. See, for example, McGillivray, *Blazing Cane*, 133–34.
18. Najarro Pujol, “Luis Casas Romero: Iniciador de la era de la radio en Cuba.” <http://www.upec.cu/baul/27.html>, accessed April 21, 2010.
19. Alvarez, “A History of Cuban Broadcasting.” <http://www.olderadio.com/archives/international/cuban.html>, accessed April 20, 2010; McGillivray, *Blazing Cane*.
20. *La Discusión*, November 18, 1922.
21. Butler, “How Radio Came to Cuba,” *Radio Broadcast*, March 1925: 916–25. <http://earlyradiohistory.us/cuba.htm>, accessed April 29, 2010.

22. “Radiotelefonía,” *La Discusión*, November 28 and 30, 1922.
23. *La Discusión*, November 21, 1922, 12.
24. *La Discusión*, December 15, 1922, 7.
25. *La Discusión*, November 19, 1922, 2.
26. *La Discusión*, November 24, 1922, 7.
27. Gitelman and Pingree, “Introduction: What’s New about New Media?”
28. Power, “Torre de Babel,” *Carteles*, April 1923, 38, 43.
29. *La Discusión*, December 5, 1922; December 6, 1922, 12.
30. *La Discusión*, November 28, 1922, 4; December 6, 1922, 12.
31. Marx, “Technology: The Emergence of a Hazardous Concept,” 965–88.
32. *Carteles*, September 1923, 56.
33. Sterne, *The Audible Past*, chap. 6.
34. Radick, “R. L. Garner and the Rise of the Edison Phonograph in Evolutionary Philology”; Averill, “Ballad Hunting in the Black Republic,” 3–22; Brady, *A Spiral Way*.
35. Moreno, “Tendremos Radiocinematografía?,” *Carteles*, November 1922, 17.
36. Moreno, “La Phonofilm De Forest,” *Carteles*, April 1923, 17.
37. Hilmes, *Network Nations*.
38. O’Brien, *The Revolutionary Mission*, 227.
39. Wurtzler, *Electric Sounds*.
40. *Social*, January 1923, 52.
41. *Carteles*, December 1922, 26.
42. *Carteles*, January 1923, 21.
43. *Social*, November 1924, 75; December 1924, 57.
44. *Bohemia*, March 18, 1923, 15.
45. Scarpaci, Segre, and Coyula, *Havana: Two Faces of the Antillean Metropolis*.
46. *Carteles*, October 12, 1924, 26.
47. Gutiérrez Lanza, *El mago del siglo veinte*.
48. Power, “Torre de Babel,” *Carteles*, April 1923, 38, 43.
49. Power, “Torre de Babel,” *Carteles*, April 1923, 38, 43.
50. Guigou, “El radio y el amor,” *Carteles*, May 1923, 36, 44. This may have been authored by the same person who wrote “La Torre de Babel.”
51. Schafer, *Tuning of the World*.
52. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*.