Sonic Histories of Occupation is a recent edited collection that attempts to shift the field of sound studies away from its American- and European-centric bias, toward new avenues of research in the Global South. It does so by focusing on the role of sound in occupation, which the editors define broadly, including settler colonialism along with other kinds of military, imperial, and postimperial occupations. Some essays deal with multiply occupied regions that have histories including more than one form of occupation. The collection's essays debuted at the University of Nottingham's “Resonating Occupation” workshop in 2018 and represent a broad range of disciplinary approaches. The book is in dialogue with two recent edited collections on the history of sound, Audible Empire and Remapping Sound Studies.[1] The former investigates the role that music has played in the formation and legitimation of empires across the globe, while the latter levies a broader challenge at the field, arguing that insights from sonic histories of the Global South (largely neglected in sound studies) should be used to critique the prevailing concepts of the subdiscipline. Russell Skelchy and Jeremy Taylor, the editors of the current volume, develop this line of research, contributing to remapping and decolonizing sound studies.

Moving away from studying music in the imperial context, the essays in the collection focus on soundscapes, discursive constructions of voice or sound, and the act of performance, among other topics. The work is divided into three parts, each comprised of three chapters: The first, “Voice and Occupation,” focuses on how discursive representations and performances legitimize or challenge empire. For instance, Iris Sandjette Blake’s essay shows that Manuel Garcia II’s invention of the laryngoscope was intimately connected to France’s “civilizing mission” in North Africa. Interpreting the accounts of how Garcia invented the laryngoscope, Blake finds that descriptions of discovering both the voice and the larynx used the same the imperial (and often sexual) metaphors to describe
scientific invention and imperial conquest, what Blake calls “voice-as-territory” (p. 40).

The second part, “Memory, Sound, and Occupation,” interprets the role that sound plays in how individuals make sense of imperial relationships. The essays in this section function on two levels, interpreting how sound as a discursive object meshed well with the soundscapes manufactured under occupation, as in Kevin Sliwoski’s essay on the soundscape of Subic Bay. After the end of a formal colonial relationship between the United States and the Philippines, Sliwoski argues, the US perpetuated an informal colonial relationship by maintaining military power in the Philippines. In Subic Bay, the United States Navy invented a mythology in which their naval base was silent while the nearby town of Olongapo City was “noisy.” Discursively, this divide fits with both the navy’s broader project of creating silent or low-volume submarines and marine weapons as well as an image of the white Americans as in control of themselves and Filipinos as unruly.

The third part, “Auditory Responses to Occupation and Colonialism,” focuses on how sound contributes to strategies of resistance. Two of the collection’s most fascinating essays are in this section. One essay, by Dimitri Smirnov, interprets the sound of the railway in Kyrgyz author Chingiz Aitmatov’s The Day Lasts More Than A Hundred Years (English, 1983; originally published in Russian as И дольше века длится день, 1980). As rail travel was critical to the imperial projects of both the Russian Empire and Soviet Union, listening to the railroad “reveals continuities in the different oppressive political systems that shaped the history of Central Asia for over 200 years” (p. 174). Crucial to Smirnov’s analysis of the text is the fact that Aitmatov frames the railroad and rail station as places of disruptive noise. What gets classified as noise and who gets to make that decision is a central question in sound studies, though the unsurprising answer is often that social and economic elites control the definition of noise as part of a larger project of cultural domination.[2] Yet here, Smirnov finds an example of noise being wrestled away from elites and functioning as a critique of domination.

Tan Sooi Beng found something similar in his study of bangsawan music, a syncretic music that combined elements from diverse musical traditions, including European opera, American popular music, and South and East Asian music, on top of a base of traditional Malaysian music. This music, often titled “Malaysian Opera,” functioned to challenge the figure of the “Anglicized Malaya,” a stereotype that helped to justify the British civilizing mission. Furthermore, this music both criticized the government and spread the national feeling required to spur an independence movement.

Altogether, the essays provide several different ways to understand the importance of sound and occupation. The collection is successful in its aim of challenging some of the established norms of sound studies and sonic history. The editors define their decolonial approach as using “representations and knowledge of the world that are situated both historically and geographically” to move scholarly analysis away from an implicit Euro-American epistemology and, following Steingo and Sykes, the editors want to use the knowledge gained from other areas of the world to critique the methods and assumptions of sound studies (p. 6). From this perspective, chapters which highlight how sound functioned as agency, resistance, or counterhegemony most fulfill the aims of the collection. In addition to the chapters discussed above, DJ Hatfield’s analyses of song as Indigenous history is particularly eye-opening.

But the collection may not achieve all its aims. Part of this issue is a lack of geographic diversity. The editors acknowledge bias toward East Asia in the collection’s essays, which comprise six of the nine essays. Barring one essay that discusses the French occupation of Algeria, the African continent is not discussed, and neither is South America.
or the Caribbean, and the latter has attracted much sonic attention in recent years.[3] Furthermore, in many of these essays, Westerners in other parts of the world are still the subjects, and their relationships to sound and epistemology are centered. The authors have provided fascinating essays, but taken together they may not fulfill the ambitious stated aims of the collection.

Still, the individual chapters are engaging and will appeal to specialists of their relative areas. Many of these also offer methodological frameworks that will help to guide future research in sound studies and sonic history away from its established focus on Europe and North America. The fact that the collection is also offered as an open-access title will undoubtedly expand its reach.

Notes


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