

## LITERATURE AND CULTURAL STUDIES

## Sonic Modernity and Decolonizing Countersounds in the Poetry of Urayoán Noel

Samuel Ginsburg

University of Texas at Austin, US  
samgins@utexas.edu

Urayoán Noel's poetry has garnered much attention for its promotion of hemispheric politics and poetics, along with its interrogation of technology's structural and narrative interventions into diasporic cultures. This article investigates the role of sound in the Puerto Rican poet's articulation of contemporary struggles against overwhelming hypertechnology. The analysis focuses on three poems: "Lino: Employee of the Month," from *Kool Logic/La lógica kool* (2005); "babel o city (el gran concurso)," from *Hi-density Politics* (2010); and the live-recorded version of "Boringkén," from *Boringkén* (2008). Drawing on Aldama's (2013) concept of poetic estrangement and Dowdy's (2013) analysis of Latinx poetic critiques of neoliberalism, this article examines how exclusionary soundscapes are built through repressive understandings of sonic modernity, and how countersounds attempt to decolonize those spaces. Noel's poetry shows how creative voices and the reappropriation of sound technologies can help position the diasporic subject and subvert dominant sonic structures.

La poesía del puertorriqueño Urayoán Noel ha generado mucha atención debido a su promoción de políticas y poéticas hemisféricas, al mismo tiempo que cuestiona las intervenciones estructurales y narrativas de la tecnología en las culturas diaspóricas. Este artículo investiga el rol de sonido dentro de su articulación en la lucha contemporánea contra la hipertecnología. El análisis se centra en tres poemas: "Lino: Employee of the Month," de *Kool Logic/La lógica kool* (2005); "babel o city (el gran concurso)," de *Hi-density Politics* (2010); y la versión grabada en vivo de "Boringkén," de *Boringkén* (2008). A partir del concepto de *alejamiento poético* de Aldama (2013), y el análisis de Dowdy (2013) sobre las críticas al neoliberalismo en la poesía latinx, este artículo examina de qué forma los paisajes sonoros son construidos a través de los entendimientos represivos de la modernidad sónica, y cómo los contrasonidos intentan descolonizar estos espacios. La poesía de Noel evidencia cómo las voces creativas y la reapropiación de la tecnología sonora pueden posicionar al sujeto diaspórico y subvertir las estructuras sónicas dominantes.

In *In Visible Movement: Nuyorican Poetry from the Sixties to Slam*, the Bronx-based Puerto Rican poet and scholar Urayoán Noel reframes the relationship between the foundational Nuyorican poets of the 1960s and the later wave that began in the 1980s as one of counterculture versus counterpublic.<sup>1</sup> Noel (2014a, xx) explains: "Whereas counterculture, in Theodore Roszak's defining study *The Making of a Counter Culture* (1969), implied a resistance to technocracy, counterpublics, as theorized by Nancy Fraser, Michael Warner, and others, allow us to consider the problematically mediatized public sphere of the contemporary liberal state as a political opportunity."

Countercultures reject the totalizing nature of dominant cultural, political, and economic structures, whereas counterpublics seek to negotiate and politicize the liminal spaces of those systems. The examples that Noel cites shortly after this quote further illustrate his point: a 1971 performance of Pedro Pietri's "Puerto Rican Obituary" values the singing voice over juridical and technological markers of identity, later

<sup>1</sup> To clarify his use of the term *Nuyorican*, Noel (2014a, xxvi) writes, "Nuyorican poetry is less a programmatic movement—hence my avoidance of the term the *Nuyorican Movement*—than a multiplicity of voices speaking in one breath, joined by a decolonial sensibility and a commitment to a public (counter) culture of poetry."

works by Tato Laviera, Magdalena Gómez, and Edwin Torres focus on the difficulties of incorporation and “open up a broader reflection on the terms of identity and belonging, a diasporic cultural politics in which identity is scored in poetry’s movements on and off the page” (Noel 2014a, xx). This framework allows Noel to look beyond reductive binaries of resistance and subjection, and to articulate an embodied counterpolitics that highlights the divergences and similarities of countercultural and counterpublic poetic practices.

This article investigates the sonic counterpolitics in Noel’s poetry, although it also draws heavily from his scholarly work. The analysis in *In Visible Movement* focuses on visibility and embodiment, along with how these concepts complicate diasporic representation, it also includes an implicit acknowledgement sound’s role within the performative nature of Nuyorican counterpolitics. Noel (2014a, xxi) writes: “The poetics of such an embodied counterpolitics hinges not so much on oratorical flourishes—as in the polished, well-meaning literalness of Benjamin Bratt’s performance in the Hollywood biopic *Piñero* (2001)—but rather on more complex, even uncomfortable tones and strategies (silence, abjection, outrage, irony, glossolalia, humor, various kinds of conflicted address) that underscore the problematics of representation.”

Although Noel’s conceptualization of counterpolitics emphasizes the corporeal or visible aspects of such performances, this description is also notable in its attention to sonority. The paradoxes and messiness that make a Nuyorican counterpolitics possible are built on “uncomfortable tones,” or the strategic silences and vocalizations of the complexities of the diasporic subject. More powerful than polished eloquence, such as the cinematic representation by Bratt that Noel cites, these countersounds disrupt dominant structures of sonic modernity and open a discursive space for countercultural and counterpublic poetics. Whether in print, in a live reading, or through a recorded performance, a decolonizing poetics can be expressed through the struggle between dominant sonic structures and the rebellious sounds that attempt to reshape them.<sup>2</sup>

From the object book *Las flores del mall* (2000) to his most recent collection *Buzzing Hemisphere/Rumor hemisférico* (2015), these sonic counterpolitics can be heard throughout Noel’s poetry. Noel’s poetic work has become essential reading in studies of poetry in the Americas, both for the way he interrogates technology’s structural and narrative interventions into diasporic culture and for his conceptualization of identity in a hemispheric or trans-American context.<sup>3</sup> The body of scholarship on Noel’s poetry has grown along with his popularity. For example, Emily Maguire (2017) examines the “corporeality of place” and the intersections of physical and poetic spaces in Noel’s descriptions of urban environments. Alexandra Pagán Vélez (2013) studies Noel’s mediated language and use of humor in his work, and Kristin Dykstra (2012) focuses on the poet’s “hemispheric vision” and performance. These studies and others represent important contributions to further understanding Noel’s poetry, but a focus on Noel’s references to sound and uses of sound technology underlines the political potential of a Latin American and Latinx poetics based on decolonizing countersounds. Whether listening to the radio in a fast-food restaurant or struggling to hear one’s thoughts in a crowded city park, Noel uses sound to highlight the struggle between dominant models of development and individual attempts at identification or formation. In this article, I discuss the ways Noel’s use of sound in his poetry explores the conforming, creativity-blocking dominant soundscapes and the volatile sounds that attempt to redefine exclusionary spaces. Through close readings across his poetic and scholarly production, this study investigates the role of sound as reinforcement of Noel’s more overt arguments concerning technological development and the promotion of diasporic cultures.

This study begins with a theoretical discussion of two key concepts—sonic modernity and countersounds—to show how sound is used to both construct and resist hegemonic structures. Next, I analyze three of Noel’s poems to examine how he uses sound to represent the ongoing struggle between identity formation and homogenized modernity. First, in the poem “Lino: Employee of the Month,” from *Kool Logic/La lógica kool* (2005), the poetic voice searches for “forbidden sounds” during a late-night trip to a burger joint, sparking thoughts on functional music, the appropriation of sonic culture, and the role of sound in supporting globalized consumerism. Next, in “babel o city (el gran concurso),” from *Hi-density Politics*, a subject surrounded by roaring engines and chatting tourists wonders, “can there be a body politics in the digital era?” (Noel 2010, 29). This poem studies sound technology’s role in reshaping urban spaces while also asking which gadgets can be reappropriated as part of a sonic resistance. The discussions concerning those two poems set up my analysis of the live-recorded version of “Boringkén,” from *Boringkén* (2008), to

<sup>2</sup> Cárcamo-Huechante (2013) frames a similar argument in terms of acoustic colonialism and public audibility in his study of Mapuche radio programs.

<sup>3</sup> In his 2011 article “Bodies that Antimatter: Locating US Latino/a Poetry, 2000–2009,” Noel cites other poets that have explored similar hemispheric sensibilities, including Tato Laviera, Lorna Dee Cervantes, and Martín Espada.

see how incidental sounds and technological glitches mirror the politics laid out in the poem.<sup>4</sup> How do these uncomfortable tones demonstrate both the drawbacks and the political potential of sound technology? This analysis of Noel's work shows how hypertechnological sound structures are built, how the marginalized body struggles against this noise invasion, and how mechanical and corporeal feedback help position and identify the diasporic subject.

Noel's references to colonizing soundscapes and disruptive countersounds enact what Frederick Luis Aldama refers to as estrangement. In *Formal Matters in Contemporary Latino Poetry*, Aldama (2013, 28) argues that through estrangement "the reader feels in new ways and rethinks creatively the segments of reality the poet submits to her senses, while also perceiving with unusual clarity the linguistic and other devices the poet is using to make her experience reality in *new ways*." Noel's poetry appeals to sonic sensibilities, reframing commonplace, urban noises into opportunities for political interpretation and personal introspection. The focus on oppressive capitalist structures and their effects on diasporic identities exemplifies the arguments put forth in Michael Dowdy's *Broken Souths: Latina/o Poetic Responses to Neoliberalism and Globalization*. Dowdy (2013, 5) writes that "the Latino poems critiquing the conditions created by the global project to push radical free-market reforms and to consolidate corporate power therefore require critical approaches focusing on the uneven production of space and the deficiency of consumer-based identities." With this in mind, sound becomes the entry point into a discussion of poetry's place in counteracting these economic and political forces. Combining the perspectives of Aldama and Dowdy, framing Noel's poetry as a confrontation between sonic modernity and decolonizing countersounds provides useful insight into how new poetic voices can highlight structural inequalities while also strategizing ways to overcome those structures.

### Sonic Modernity and Countersounds

Noel's poetry explores repressive soundscapes, like Muzak-filled restaurant chains and urban parks dominated by mechanical noise, along with the poetic and musical disruptions that attempt to reshape those spaces. An analysis of Noel's intervention into the issues of sonic modernity and countersounds must begin by exploring connections of sound, technology, and the marginalization of bodies based on race, class, or colonization. The historian Emily Thompson (2002, 1), in conversation with the earlier works of R. Murray Schafer and Alain Corbin, rethinks the concept of the soundscape, a space made up of both the acoustic energies and the material objects that either create or destroy them. Thompson argues that focusing on the aural dimension of modernity allows us to articulate the significance that technology has had in the construction of culture (11). With new technologies came new sounds, ones that established novel concepts of efficiency and dominance over natural environments. Most relevant to this project is the way in which sound "constituted a commodity in a culture increasingly defined by the act of consumption, and was evaluated by listeners who tuned their ears to the sounds of the market" (3). The introduction of modern mechanical sounds also led to the conceptual separation between acceptable sound and dismissible noise, along with the diagnosis of noise as a social problem. Thompson illustrates this point with the aural phenomena of reverberation—the sonic lingering once understood as a welcome part of the soundscape, later dismissed as noise to be eliminated once the concentration of technological noises began overwhelming certain spaces (3). In *Mechanical Sound: Technology, Culture and Public Problems of Noise in the Twentieth Century*, Karin Bijsterveld (2008) studies complaints about noises to better understand the history of those invasive sounds and the technologies that produced them.<sup>5</sup> Noise became a way to differentiate modern subjects and spaces. This marginalization process is twofold: not only is noise used to designate social status; the hierarchy is also reinforced by those who profit from commodifying these sounds and the technologies that produce them.

Sonic modernity refers to the use of sound to promote exclusionary and colonizing understandings of technological and social progress. The concept of sonic modernity is derived from Jonathon Sterne's (2003, 351) *The Audible Past: The Origins of Sound Reproduction* and its discussion of sound's role in establishing social power: "We contemplate the history that people have made through shaping and reshaping the experience of sounds. The banality of that power over and through sound is a defining feature of modern life."

<sup>4</sup> This article forgoes a traditional chronology in an attempt to arrive at a more complete argument surrounding "Boringken." I believe that the sonic politics suggested in both "Lino: Employee of the Month" and "babel o city (el gran concurso)," illuminate the more subtle countersounds within the live recording.

<sup>5</sup> Bijsterveld's most useful comparison is between the rise of noise as a social problem and the similar trajectory of smell. The material byproducts of industrialization created not only new smells but also new social structures that defined those sensations. Smell became a signifier in which one could be placed into a certain social class; elites separated themselves from the masses through narratives of stench and personal hygiene (15).

This quote is revealing for two reasons. First, it highlights the usefulness of sound history as a framework for analyzing larger cultural phenomena. This is also established earlier in the same study, when Sterne argues that “the history of sound technology offers a route into a field of conjunctures among material, economic, technical, ideation, practical, and environmental changes” (7). Second, Sterne is clear throughout his text that technology cannot be studied as spontaneous or autonomous, and that sound technologies carry out and amplify the desires of their human creators: “People design and use technologies to enhance or promote certain activities and discourage others” (8). Combining these two points, the historical experiences of sound and sound technology illustrate the inequalities and power dynamics dictated by those who benefit from a consolidated understanding of modernity. Sonic modernity demonstrates how repressive social structures and spaces are built, along with sound’s role in excluding certain subjects or bodies.

The urban soundscape is both the most common example of the deployment of sonic modernity and the acoustic space examined in Noel’s poetry. Schafer’s (1977, 233) analysis of the urban soundscape focuses on the chaotic sonic nature of the city, making it harder for people to connect or even think about others: “The modern city does not display such deliberate acoustic rhythms as the village or the natural soundscape. Better stated, the great profusion of rhythms cancels one another out. The principle feature of the city soundscape is random motion... It is the continuous low-frequency roar... It is composed by a million Mr. Browns and Ms. Smiths running around in their private circles or slipping through some more haphazard routines, rarely synchronizing their activities, rarely considering one another.”

For Schafer, the overwhelming nature of the urban soundscape has material effects on the ways in which inhabitants interact with the city and with each other. Part of the project of urbanization is the compartmentalization of lives and objectives. This implicitly maintains a system of competition for resources and advancement that facilitates the continued exclusion of marginalized groups. Schafer goes on to lament the lack of rhythmic definition and ceremony within this soundscape, proposing these sonic disruptions as ways to synchronize or slow down city dwellers. Interrupting the overwhelmingly chaotic urban soundscape becomes a strategy for contesting the economic, political, and social hierarchies that cities represent and maintain. Noel’s poetry, both in print and as a performance, stands out as a sonic intervention that seeks to highlight problematic structures of sonic modernity and serve as a strategy for redefining urban soundscapes.

Although sound and technology play a large role in the othering of bodies in certain soundscapes, they also provide the materials for resistance and redefinition. Brandon LaBelle contributes to this conversation by not only theorizing how acoustics are used to construct spaces of consumption but also showing how individual participants in this soundscape can push back and reestablish their statuses as active, thinking beings. In *Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life*, LaBelle (2010) identifies feedback and mishearing as tools against the prescriptive nature of exclusionary sonic spaces. While acoustic territories attempt to homogenize and alienate, feedback allows for a reassertion of the self: “Feedback, as a communicational channel, affords an audible understanding for self and surrounding as they flow together, defining a positive channel for environmental sensitivity; feedback is a sort of registration of this acoustical interaction, indicating points of contact and connection as well as breakage and interruption. Feedback generates a locative sense for place and emplacement—how my own presence is an active participant within the larger acoustic ecology” (LaBelle 2010, 169).

These breakages and interruptions, grouped in the current project along with other intrusive sonic practices as countersounds, are reinterpreted as productive moments of resistance and empowerment.<sup>6</sup> A key aspect of these countersounds is that they contest sonic modernity without completely rejecting the technologies involved. This strategy mirrors that of Afro-modernity, defined by Michael Hanchard (1999, 247) as the “selective incorporation of technologies, discourses, and institutions” in an attempt to redefine the concept of modernity in a way that is autonomous of the dominant structures that have been used to exclude historically marginalized groups. Countersounds challenge assumptions of who should control sound technologies and the role of sound in creating political solidarities. By challenging sonic modernity, producers of countersounds like Urayoán Noel redefine urban spaces and rewrite narratives of technological and social progress.

### “Lino: Employee of the Month”: Muzak and Forbidden Sounds

Urayoán Noel’s poetic interventions into countersounds and sonic modernity open up a discussion of how sound can be deployed or reimaged. An earlier example that fits this project is Noel’s *Kool Logic/La lógica kool*, published in 2005 with an accompanying DVD of performances and interviews. The bilingual poems

<sup>6</sup> In his discussion of the acoustic territory of the street, LaBelle uses the example of the Los Angeles’s lowrider community, in which Mexican Americans assert a political and cultural identity through their modified and noisy vehicles, to show how countersounds interrupt acoustic tendencies that seek to exclude unwanted bodies that do not fit the desired demographics of certain spaces.

highlight a poetic voice that does not feel quite at home in either white, dominant US culture or in New York's Puerto Rican diaspora. Throughout the text, sound is present as a marker of inclusion and exclusion. In the collection's title, the hard "K" sounds provoke an uncomfortable tone, as the extra effort that one puts into pronouncing it highlights the awkwardness of the concept of coolness and the act of labeling something *cool*. The title also connects to the collection's discussions of the capitalist appropriation of sonic culture, as Hafez and Ling (2006) have shown how the cigarette brand Kool used hip-hop, jazz, and "Latin" music to promote their tobacco products in historically marginalized communities. That images and sounds of African American and Latinx culture were used to sell cigarettes that ultimately did damage to the bodies of those people illustrates the nefarious potentials of the sonic structures built on colonizing corporate aspirations.<sup>7</sup>

Although corporations can co-opt these cultural sonic markers, Noel's *Kool Logic/La lógica kool* remains open to the possibility that they still play an important role in individual identity formations. For example, in "Spic Tracts," the speaker refers to particular sounds as he contemplates his place between two worlds. He feels alienated from the community because he does not possess stereotypical markers of Puerto Ricanness:

Don't even have a car  
to wash on Sunday afternoons  
away those NY/PR blues  
no homeboy convoy to loot Loisaida  
listening to la Fania  
salsa vieja por mi madre por la radio (Noel 2005, 71)

Here Noel posits a specific sound—salsa music played on the radio—as a signifier of this Puerto Rican space and its community living in New York City. The alliterative rhythm within these lines highlights the musical flow of this acoustic space: *homeboy convoy*, and *loot, Loisaida, listening, la Fania*. These lyrics weave between English and Spanish, demonstrating the bilingual nature of this sonic space that to outsiders could be considered a disruptive countersound in a dominant, monolingual culture. The reference to Loisaida, a Nuyorican pronunciation of the New York City neighborhood Lower East Side, similarly rebrands this territory through sound. The poet Bimbo Rivas popularized the term in 1974, reflecting how Puerto Rican voices had the power to linguistically redefine urban spaces. The mention of the Fania All-Stars, the popular salsa band started in 1968 to showcase Fania Records's musicians, demonstrates Latinx culture's inextricable place within the US music industry.<sup>8</sup> However, another musical allusion in this stanza—the blues—opens up a discussion about what happens when marginalized voices disrupt the dominant sonic culture. The reference to the blues could connect the speaker to a larger, US-based African diaspora, it could reinscribe the musical form onto a specifically New York–Puerto Rican map, or it could be a colloquialization of a previously politically charged sonic form.

The bilingual, complicated sonority in "Spic Tracts" is in contrast to much of the collection's focus on homogenized, emotionless acoustic spaces. For example, in "Pills and Booze (the slacker song)," an aimless, directionless speaker describes how he wastes his time:

On rainy days I wander through the malls,  
In various states of sensory deprivation.  
I listen to the hum of waterfalls  
That emanates from distant Muzak stations. (Noel 2005, 3)

The shopping mall is a place of escape where one does not feel or need to pay attention, except to allow the mall's minimalistic pacifying sounds to dominate the soundscape. More than just a passive hearing, this listening act is both ubiquitous and affective.<sup>9</sup> Synthetic sounds imitate the natural, creating closed sonic structures that promote consumerism instead of creative individual thought. Jonathan Sterne's (1997, 25) close listening of the Mall of America illustrates how functional music—commonly referred to as Muzak—forms part of the building's architecture and contributes to the "production and consumption of

<sup>7</sup> Hafez and Ling's study ends with a successful example of sonic disruption, as a protest led by Afrika Bambaatta outside of the 2004 Kool Mixx DJ Champions helped promote a large-scale boycott of Kool products (364).

<sup>8</sup> For more on the US absorption of Latin American music, see Pérez Firmat (2008).

<sup>9</sup> For more on "ubiquitous listening," see Kassabian (2013).



consumption.” Muzak erases the controversial aspects of popular songs, separating sound from its meaning in an attempt to homogenize commercial spaces (Sterne 1997, 31). Sterne focuses on how Muzak is directed at an ideal, desired (white, upper-middle class) clientele, such that the productive music helps define who can be considered members of the public, the mall’s consumer culture, and (given the mall’s name) the nation. Functional music is juxtaposed to rules and signs that prohibit “loud, boisterous behavior,” thus contributing to a commercialized soundscape that dictates what sounds are considered acceptable and what noises are not (Sterne 1997, 43). Loud, boisterous behavior disrupts this homogenized, consumerist soundscape, and any participant who is not shopping is at once alienated and asserting his or her right to exist in this space in a way that counters the capitalist aims of the mall. Because the speaker in “Pills and Booze (the slacker song)” does not mention purchasing anything—he is an aimless wanderer but not a shopper—he does not fit into the community of consumers that shopping centers hope to attract. Sterne’s sonic analysis mirrors Arlene Dávila’s (2016, 162–163) study of mall culture in Latin America: “Shopping malls want to symbolize modernity, and part of this image involves projecting inclusivity and political correctness. However ... there is a fine line between inclusion and accommodation, in their case obviously in favor of sanitized versions of difference.” Muzak creates an illusion of diversity and inclusivity, though the mall ultimately strives to be apolitical and homogenized.<sup>10</sup>

Another poem from the collection that mentions Muzak, “The Pragmatist,” discusses the affect of functional music on laborers by describing the monotony of working in an office building:

Day after day  
 9 to 5 (or 6 to midnight),  
 a cartoon hunchback  
 in a cut-out cubicle  
 humming mindless Muzak  
 writing mindless memos  
 to remind his mindless boss  
 of mindless meetings (Noel 2005, 37)

Here, functional music is understood as part of a system that extracts labor from its workers at a great physical and emotional cost. Jones and Schumacher connect Muzak to capitalist power and social divisions of labor, tracing the phenomena of functional music back to its origins as a mode of increasing the productivity of factory workers. Played in the background, Muzak contributed to “softening the edges of the more brutal aspects” of assembly-line work and making up an important part of early industrial social engineering (Jones and Schumacher 1992, 159). The ubiquity of the music can be said to mirror the constant surveillance of the workspace, with factory owners manipulating their employees into working harder and faster, thus highlighting the social divisions between those who perform labor and those who profit from it. Although the man described in the poem works in an office, the monotony of mindless commerce distorts his body, turning him into a hunchback. His cartoonish nature also highlights how the worker has been flattened into a two-dimensional being, unable to completely function as a well-rounded character. In this case, the functional music has been internalized, not just played around him but also hummed by the worker, connecting his dehumanizing work to the meaningless sounds and the marginalized bodies exploited within this labor regime.

Noel’s use of sound in the rest of *Kool Logic/La lógica kool* sets the stage for the countersounds performed in “Lino: Employee of the Month.” This poem takes place in a similarly lifeless, commercial space—a fast-food restaurant. The speaker enters with sense of self-loathing, asking himself, “What am I doing here/ordering onion grease and stale root beer ...?” (Noel 2005, 17). Unlike the staged, digitally enhanced posters hanging outside the restaurant, or the advertising campaigns that show happy families enjoying delicious meals together, the speaker is confronted with the ugly realities of the space. Nothing more than grease and chemicals, the social promises offered up by fast-food marketing campaigns are never realized. The speaker surveys the somber customers that frequent a place like this so late at night, including himself in this mass of stoic wanderers. The late-night scene at the fast-food restaurant is understood in the poem as a space in which consumption takes place not out of need but because consumers have nothing else to do. Even those who have made emotional connections are seen as incapable of feeling and acting on their sensations:

<sup>10</sup> Noel’s collection *Las flores del mall* (2000) also covers the experience of the marginalized *flâneur* within the mall setting.

Somewhere lovers huddle crouch  
 cuddle  
 anesthetized by steady doses  
 of extra-strength moonshine. (Noel 2005, 17)

The sterilized nature of these relationships mirrors the homogenized space in which these people are found. Connections are made between alcohol and fast food, substances that offer young people immediate escape with little sustenance. The intimate positions of “huddle” and “cuddle” are broken up by the sickly “crouch,” an uncomfortable curling of the body that carries a connotation of fear, illness, or addiction. This crouching also interrupts the rhyming of the words that surround it, disrupting an artificial sonic space that would rather seem inviting to lovers than to this poem’s subject. Even as the voice attempts to document the depressing nature of the surrounding scene, linguistic markers of consumerism, like “extra-strength” or “Employee of the Month,” force their way into his train of thought.

Sound plays a large role in the construction of this sonically homogenized place, or what Dowdy (2013) would refer to as the uneven production of space. When the speaker enters, he is surprised to hear something other than functional music; while he was “expecting airy Muzak,” he is actually “listening instead to Bert (where’s Ernie?)/do the call-and-response with the Muppet gospel choir” (Noel 2005, 17). The *Sesame Street* soundtrack contrasts with the drunk, detached people who are populating the space, and it signals a contradiction between the clientele represented in the chain’s advertisements and those who really do enter, similar to Sterne’s observations from the Mall of America. The music selection also implies a co-optation of African American culture; actual gospel music would not fit the homogenized atmosphere that the fast-food restaurant aims for, but a cartoonified version of it works just fine. Any political or religious meaning that the music might have is erased and made family-friendly. This practice of cultural appropriation is continued later as the speaker leaves the building, hearing a “watered-down rumba/with Big Bird on the bongos” (Noel 2005, 18). Again, actual Latinx music, marked in the collection’s other poems as important cultural icons or products, does not have a place in this acoustic territory. It must be mediated through US popular culture that whitens and depoliticizes it, transforming it into a vehicle of capitalist gain. What would happen if actual gospel or rumba music were played in this space? Why would that be dangerous to the restaurant’s homogenized, consumerist project?

This transmutation of Latinx culture is reflected by the similar manipulation of Latinx bodies. The speaker enters this space and consumes food he does not really want, and Lino works the register and cleans up after messy patrons. The speaker notes Lino’s enthusiasm and youthful appearance, implying that the system and his surroundings have not yet broken him down. His youth is also highlighted in a way that shows how capitalist fantasies prey on young, marginalized people while the actual system often does not pay them enough to participate in consumer culture. Lino speaks enthusiastically, “crooning ‘Good evening’ like a fresh-faced Sinatra: ‘Ol’ Brown Eyes plays the Burger Grill Apollo!’” but the speaker can muster only indifference: “Yea right” (Noel 2005, 17). In the speaker’s eyes, Lino’s performance highlights his futility within this space; as a “brown” subject he will never reach Sinatra-level heights, and the only Apollo available to him is the grill, where he is valued on the basis of his ability to turn out mass-produced burgers. The speaker, presumably older than the man at the register, sees himself as Lino’s broken future. At the same time, referring to Lino’s performance as “crooning” demonstrates the complexities of this acoustic space, as crooners have typically been thought of as white men singing American jazz standards. Lino’s crooning, especially juxtaposed to Bert’s gospel and Big Bird’s bongos, reflects the pressures on marginalized subjects within these homogenized spaces to conform to their sonic surroundings.

By the end of “Lino: Employee of the Month,” the speaker admits that maybe Lino knows more than him, that maybe he has unlocked the secret to maintaining his humanity within the dehumanizing sonic modernity of consumerism. Sound is assumed to be the key to Lino’s resistance:

I think Lino knows better  
 as he slams the door behind me  
 mopping mayo stains  
 & I wish I’d hear forbidden sounds  
 tap into secret signs  
 tumble down trap doors  
 anything reminiscent of anew (Noel 2005, 18)

Although the speaker had previously focused on Lino's crooning, here the sound that truly disrupts the acoustic space is the "slam" of the door. That slam is a countersound that contests the sanitized facade that Lino is forced to perform during business hours, serving as a tiny act of rebellion by an employee subjected to the demoralizing acoustics of *Sesame Street* music over the course of his shift. That slam jolts the speaker, giving him hope for Lino's survival but not his own. As the speaker watches Lino mop the floor from behind the glass door that separates them, their simultaneous connection and detachment demonstrates how sonic modernity attempts to destroy solidarities based on identity and community. While Lino has figured out a mode of survival, the speaker is forced to wish for a sign or sound that could show him the way. To him, newness and individual creativity are set up as the opposition to homogenized sound and repressive capitalism. Still, his lonely paralysis outside a closed fast-food restaurant highlights the ways in which hegemonic acoustic structures confuse and alienate marginalized customers while simultaneously creating a dependence on their mass-produced goods and the artificial, homogenized (though never totally satisfying) version of consumption.

### **"babel o city (el gran concurso)": Urban Space and Mechanical Sounds**

Five years after the publication of *Kool Logic/La lógica kool*, Noel's (2010) *Hi-density Politics* shows that these oppressive structures of sonic modernity have slowly spread from malls and fast-food restaurants, taking over and increasing amount of urban space. Dávila (2016, 172) refers to this phenomenon as "the mallification of our cities and the spread of the logics of security, surveillance, commodification, and precarity into more aspects of everyday life." This collection by Noel highlights how technology has permeated all public spaces, including poetic ones, redefining the way we relate to our bodies and our cultures. The collection also displays Noel's affinity for experimenting with technology in his poetry. For example, "african noel.coachella valley snow" is a found poem made from lines in a Yahoo! group discussion about Christmas gifts. By remixing lines from a medium that is high-tech and a topic that is timeworn, Noel plays with the ways in which technologies reshape how we consume, connect, and ask questions. The nontraditional punctuation, marking the text as mediated through the internet community, throws off the rhythm of the poem and forces the reader to recognize how new technologies cause shifts in linguistic practices. Another poem in the collection, "trill set," is an arrangement of misinterpretations of César Vallejo's *Trilce*, as read in Spanish to an English-language speech-recognition technology. The mishearings and disconnects between dictation software and the human voice are both a challenge to technology's supposed mastery over language and the opening of a space for creative poetic expression. Noel mistrusts technology and also embraces its potential; while technology—and sound technology in particular—plays a role in the construction of repressive, colonizing structures, these poetic experiments with digital tools show that they can also be useful for challenging those systems. Noel's close examination of the effects of and systems supported by technological advancements strikes a similar tone as Leo Marx's (2010) definition of technology, which argues that a particular machine or gadget cannot be fully understood without looking at the entire techno-social network that surrounds it. In this case, that network would include the social, political, and economic assumptions involved in the development, deployment, and marketing of digital sound technologies.

In the 2011 article "Bodies That Anti-Matter: Locating U.S. Latino/a Poetry, 2000–2009," Noel investigates the complex ways in which Latinx poetry has been mediated and circulated on the internet. The article concludes with a discussion of Josefina Báez and Edwin Torres, two poet-performers who experiment with digital technologies in their work. In this discussion, Noel emphasizes how their performances on YouTube resist hypertechnological culture and reestablish a body politics. On their choices to involve digital technology in their poetic and performative texts, Noel (2011, 857) writes: "YouTube (and perhaps 2.0 culture more generally) is a liminal space, an archive and a generative space, a space that can allow for the sorts of nomad poetics ... while participating in the commoditizing of poetry... It embodies both the promise and the perils of a poetics of antimatter."

According to Noel, Báez and Torres show that while technology helps create neoliberal spaces of exclusion and inequality, it may also be used as a means to expose and challenge those very same structures. Instead of giving in to a technological regime that appropriates and invisibilizes marginalized subjects, Noel endorses mode of virtual participation that promotes "innovative poetics [that] can reembody this barren ideological space, allowing for a nuanced conception of identity that self-reflexively addresses the complexities of being and belonging in a global, neoliberal society" (2011, 885). Although others have theorized the internet's relationship to the marginalized body as either the digital erasure of racial difference (Hansen 2006) or an amplification of established patterns of racial exclusion (Nakamura 2002), Noel's concept of virtual reemodiment provides a counterpublic strategy for reestablishing subjectivity without having to forfeit



corporeality. It also calls for a type of poetic estrangement (Aldama 2013) that forces readers to consider the greater ramifications of their experiences and interactions off- and online.

In *Hi-density Politics*, Noel is overt in his use of sound-recording technology in his writing process. For example, the poem “guánica” was originally composed as a series of BlackBerry voice recordings, rejecting traditional modes of poetic production. Here the poet is someone who leaves the desk and interacts with the beauty and ugliness of the world around him. Knowing that the poem was a recorded voice before a printed text allows the reader to “hear” the breaths, crackles, and other uncomfortable sounds hidden between and among the poetic lines.<sup>11</sup> The role of the cellphone in poetic production is taken a step further in the online project started in 2012 called *Wokitokiteki*, in which Noel records himself creating improvised poems while walking around different cities. Instead of pointing the camera toward the city around him, Noel keeps the picture focused on his own face, so that the viewer’s experience of that urban space is mediated through his eyes and mouth, even before it is recorded on his phone and uploaded to YouTube. In March 2016, before a live reading of *Buzzing Hemisphere/Rumor hemisférico* in Austin, Texas, Noel addressed the double nature of technology and how one must find a balance between the way gadgets control marginalized bodies and the political potentials they unleash. When discussing the technological politics (and technological poetics) of *Wokitokiteki*, he said:

Pienso que la tecnología del smartphone me va a manar con la gente que caminan por la ciudad junto a mí, y me doy cuenta, not really. Con lo que acabo son muchos apps y mucho ruido de ambiente, en este sentido la puesta de una poesía urbana fracasó, pero tal vez ese fracaso se vuelve una experiencia compartible. Así que de alguna manera, esto es la promesa de la tecnología. Google nos mercadea la información, nos regula la privacidad, pero estamos todos conectados, y podemos tuitear hacia la revolución. (Noel, Staig, and Ginsburg 2016)<sup>12</sup>

Social media and growing availability of smartphone technology have the ability to connect communities, but it is equally likely that our dependence on these gadgets promotes isolation instead of solidarity. Although Noel recognizes the limitations of these technologies, including the colonizing structures that enable large corporations to profit off of content generated by marginalized consumers, he acknowledges their potential for fostering political action.

From *Hi-density Politics*, “babel o city (el gran concurso)” investigates the conflicting functions of sound technology and its role in reshaping public spaces. Also composed on a BlackBerry, this poem illustrates the ways mechanical sound can create obstacles for self-identification and personal positioning. Different from “Lino: Employee of the Month,” this poem ventures beyond spaces of consumption like malls and restaurants, looking at how the same sonic battles can affect exterior urban settings. The speaker of “babel o city (el gran concurso)” finds himself on August 6, 2009, sitting in the Bronx’s Joyce Kilmer Park, on Grand Concourse Boulevard, just two blocks away from Yankee Stadium. Understanding this location is an essential part of analyzing the political message of the poem. Translating “Grand Concourse” into “el gran concurso” renders visible and audible the prevalence of Spanish speakers in the area, especially since the 1960s, when real estate development in Manhattan pushed Puerto Rican and African American residents into the outer boroughs. Similar to the previously mentioned *Loisaida*, coined by Bimbo Rivas, the use of “el gran concurso” instead of “Grand Concourse” challenges the official acoustics of the city, more accurately painting New York as diversely multilingual.

The choice of this part of the Bronx also highlights the frictions between urban development projects and the residents of those areas. A large-scale public revitalization project centered on the Grand Concourse was completed in 2008, and the newest version of Yankee Stadium was inaugurated in early 2009. The baseball stadium, an architectural behemoth with little aesthetic connection to the neighborhood that surrounds it, sells a commodified version of the Bronx to visitors with often no interest in seeing the rest of the borough. In the poem, the act of touring or visiting is juxtaposed to the people who inhabit those spaces and live their lives there. Upon seeing a group of tourists searching for the Bronx Museum, the speaker comments, “certainly not local (but then again neither am I still in transit) clearly out of place in this enclave of black and brown” (Noel 2010, 29). While the white tourists are represented as temporary invaders of a space that

<sup>11</sup> This “hearing” by the reader follows Don Ihde’s (2007) contention that trained musicians could hear songs internally by merely reading the sheet music. This phenomenon connects the reader’s experience to the “sounds” produced by a print text.

<sup>12</sup> Translation (by author): “I think that with the smartphone technology I will vibe with the people that walk through the city with me, and I realize that, not really. What I end up with are many apps and a lot of ambient noise, in this sense the urban poetic performance failed, but maybe that failure becomes a sharable experience. So in some way, that is the promise of technology. Google sells our information, they regulate our privacy, but we are all connected, and we can tweet towards revolution.”

is not their own, the speaker recognizes his own displacement by saying that he also does not feel like he belongs, even in the neighborhood in which he lives. There is a simultaneous alienation from these tourists (possibly visiting from as close as Connecticut, New Jersey, or Manhattan) who view entering the speaker's space as an excursion, and the idea that one's connection to any particular location can be only ephemeral. As a diasporic subject, he is never settled, making it even more difficult to define himself within the chaos around him. He asks himself, "jarred by transit years away from home can there be a body politics in the digital era?" (Noel 2010, 29). The hypertechnological urban landscape around him highlights his state of nonbelonging, and the poem shows the marginalized body's struggle against becoming consumed by the dominant system.

In the poem, the speaker sitting in the park is overwhelmed by the concentration of activity around him. Masses of people and structures make it impossible to discern any type of individuality. The poem begins, "no identity but in hi-density proximity of buildings of bodies more than proximity a propensity to shudder when faced with the other in self" (Noel 2010, 28). Urban bodies are combined with urban architecture to create a space in which interpersonal connections cannot be made; people shake when confronted by other bodies, but that shuddering also elicits a "shuttering" or disconnecting from the outside world. The speaker feels the intense pressure to mentally shutter himself off from the surrounding chaos, even though he has no physical barriers to construct around himself. This is clear when looking at the sounds produced in this line: While it begins with a frantic repetition of staccatos (*identity, density, proximity, propensity*) that reflect the cacophony and movement of the space, that rhythm is disrupted by the "shudder" that shifts the dynamics of the stanza. This interruption is both a refuge from the mechanical sounds that dominate the public park and an obstacle to poetic production, as the speaker is seemingly in this space to observe and create. While mechanical and sonic chaos foster urban isolation, the poet's goal is to resist those repressive acoustics and compose something new. Thus, this poem is staged in the conflicting space between sonic modernity and countersounds.

Sound is immediately identified as a contributor to this chaotic and exclusionary territory. Noel writes, "Let's start with sound as in bus exhaust pigeon squawk softballs plunking crying and calling ... roar of jet or taxi" (Noel 2010, 28). The sheer number of intrusive sounds makes it difficult to compose any complete thought. Instead, the speaker merely lists the noises around him, as that is the only way to record a memory of the sound before another one begins. However, while the diverse list of sounds seems like a disconnected mix, the construction of the line exhibits a lyrical flow that creates a melody out of urban chaos. The repeating "aw" sound becomes the musical foundation of this space, as *exhaust, squawk, soft,* and *call* transform into a sonic baseline that reshapes the soundscape. The hard Cs and Ks (*squawk, plunk, crying, calling*) provide the percussion that both guides and conflicts with the other sounds. Rewriting urban spaces as musical compositions is an attempt to make sense out of cacophonous soundscapes through creativity and imagination, reimagining the city as a symphony of connections and sonic repartee.<sup>13</sup> This forging of connections between the urban sounds also complicates the notion of what sounds should be considered natural or artificial. In this poem, the squawk of the pigeon is juxtaposed to technological noise pollution of the jet and taxi, all of which have been naturalized in the urban sonic environment. The speaker interprets the intrusive sound of the jet engine in the background as a "roar," a sound that often evokes an animal voice instead of a mechanical one. The jet's roar inhabits this park as much as the pigeon's squawk, both part of the overwhelming sonic environment that the speaker attempts to decipher.

The intrusive mechanical sounds that dominate the park make it difficult to articulate or identify oneself, ripping meaning away from the body as noise can excise meaning from sound. The speaker thinks, "Turbines overhead where are we propelled to? towards meaning perhaps to speak is to insist on meaning-making against the body's unmeaning" (Noel 2010, 29). The turbines in the sky are not only driving the plane forward but also affecting the directions of the people below in the park, emphasizing how hard it is to escape the sonic modernity that values technological advancement over human peace of mind. The speaker marks the voice, a reconnection between sound and meaning, as the tool with which one may assert the self, but technological cacophony makes these pronunciations increasingly arduous. Still, the speaker pushes the need to establish both bodies and sounds in the fight against these oppressive sonic structures, saying, "Politics now is all about positioning ... soundscapes body scrapes a voice somehow between the Skypes and the skyscrapes" (Noel 2010, 29). By claiming positioning as the base of politics, the speaker asserts that reestablishing marginalized voices in these dominant soundscapes will be key to survival and resistance.

<sup>13</sup> Holmes (2015) and Gentic (2014) both provide convincing arguments on the effects of reimagining urban soundscapes as symphonies in their respective analyses of the 2003 Cuban film *Suite Habana*.

The repetition of jarring, metallic sounds (*soundscapes*, *scrapes*, *Skypes*, *skyscrapes*) posits that these same mechanical acoustics can be reconfigured and remixed into something that pushes back against repressive sonic modernity.

Just as Noel does in *Wokitokiteki*, part of the speaker's political positioning involves taking advantage of sound-recording technology. His BlackBerry becomes a key tool in this struggle to assert a voice: "This machine I read into makes the most of breath as shared in props up the experience" (Noel 2010, 28). More than just a recording device, the phone also symbolizes the communities and connections that technology can foster, transforming an individual voice into a collective one. While the hyperdigitalization of culture threatens to amplify the invisibility of marginalized subjects, that same technology helps create a sonic archive of countersounds that resist dominant soundscapes. Maguire (2017, 170) argues that the BlackBerry makes possible a new mode of poetic creation: "This mediation ensures a spontaneity that would be impossible in a carefully crafted written poem, but it also indicates the capacity for the device—as a material object and thus, implicitly, as a commodity—to shape aesthetic production." While the smartphone remains a symbol of a greater social network that has been commodified and colonized, the gadget itself allows for a mobility and perspective previously unavailable to poets. While the presence of the smartphone provokes ethical and aesthetic paradoxes—Maguire (2017, 176) asks, "A poetic journey through localized, site-specific urban space may be an antidote to global capital's dissociations, but can it really be seen as anything more than an attempt at evasion?"—Noel's poetry revels in this ambiguity and transforms it into a political opportunity.

The speaker mentions hip-hop as a countersound that challenges the sonic hierarchies of this urban space: "This park with the Lorelei that spouts to hip-hop beats has done well with its trauma has survived the compression of urban space and its latter day reopening to families and markets" (Noel 2010, 28). Most of the poem focuses on the overwhelming mix of chaotic sounds, but here music is singled out as fighting through the crowded soundscape. While the construction around the park makes the space feel compressed or condensed, a tiny refuge that may not survive many more urban development projects, the hip-hop music that cannot be contained pushes back against and redefines those boundaries. Part of this decolonizing process is the articulation of a diaspora through sounds that empower marginalized subjects. Similarly, Noel's poetry engages in a counterpolitics against a hypertechnological version of development that marginalizes Puerto Rican culture and bodies. The park is referred to as a space that has survived a trauma; it has survived because of the countersounds that contest the sonic modernity that surrounds it. In the same way, this poem proposes counterhegemonic voices that return the meaning back to sounds, calling for marginalized subjects to use the technologies around them instead of being used by them. Noel identifies and enunciates the sound technologies built into these exclusionary spaces while also appropriating them to reestablish a place for creativity and corporeality.

### "Boringkén": Performance and Solidarity

While the previously mentioned poems attempt to transcribe sounds and countersounds into print, Noel's sonic decolonization is put into practice in the audio version of *Boringkén*, published in 2008. The boredom mentioned in the title reflects Noel's preoccupations with a lack of creativity in a hypertechnological, homogenized world. The insertion of the word *boring* into *Borinquen*, the name of Puerto Rico's main island and a Spanish derivation of the Taíno *Borikén*, also references the difficulty of maintaining a marginalized identity in the face of US cultural imperialism. Just as Noel's vocalizing of "Loisaida" and "el gran concurso" challenged the official acoustics of the Lower East Side and the Grand Concourse, the uncomfortable sound of English into a linguistic marker of Puerto Rican identity (and the source of the term *Boricua*) highlights the complexities of a multilingual, diasporic soundscape. The accented *kén* in the title and the image on the book's cover make a clear reference to the longtime companion of Barbie, the famous children's toy made by Mattel. This reference is reinforced by the poem "Tourist Threesome," which depicts Barbie and Ken looking for a sexual adventure in the tropics. Like the sound of Big Bird playing the bongos in "Lino: Employee of the Month," the "Kenification" of Puerto Rican culture represents the watering down and co-option of the island's cultural production so that it better fits within a US-centered market.

*Boringkén* was released along with a CD by the same name, featuring performances by the Bronx-based musical collective Spanic Attack. Each poem on the CD is backed by music that intensifies Noel's lines. For example, the constantly changing tempos and percussion in "Boringkén me llama" highlight the Afro-Caribbean rhythms often co-opted or made inaudible by dominant sonic structures.<sup>14</sup> The sound of

<sup>14</sup> Denning (2015, 137) argues that recording and playing these kinds of sounds not only assists in decolonizing projects, but also is in itself a "somatic decolonization, the decolonization of the ear and the dancing body."

a skipping CD in the background of “Milagro médico en Ponce de León” provides a jarring countersound that forces the listener to actively listen to each line. However, more than the accompanying band, the instrument that most stands out on the album is Noel’s voice. From the soft, lounge music–like vocals of “Nihil isleño” to the rhythmic and tonal experimentation of “Amazón,” the recorded voice plays in the liminal space between speaking and singing. The experimentation with sound recording equipment is most apparent in “Informe del tiempo,” in which a subtle crackling is added to Noel’s vocals, transforming the voice into that of a radio announcer from a previous era. Despite Noel’s focus on contemporary social issues, this allusion to past sonic models situates the collection’s politics in a historical context. Throughout the CD, each time that an *s* is held longer than expected at the end of a word, or whenever the microphone picks up quick breaths between lines, the recorded versions digress from the printed poems and question print’s ability to fully capture the poet’s intended countersounds (and in turn the breadth of his counterpolitics). The sonic additions made in the recordings mark the printed versions as incomplete, similar to the way Noel (2014a, xxxvi) describes Nuyorican poet Jorge Brandon’s work in *In Visible Movement*: “an improvisational, vernacular, unfinished poetics that works against the confines of the printed page, and in so doing they locate diaspora at the limits of representation.” By vocalizing these poems in ways that could never be inferred by reading the printed versions, the album is an audible text that underscores the importance of sound and performance in Noel’s poetry.

Just as Noel contrasted Hollywood’s polished representation of Nuyorican performance to the uncomfortable embodied counterpolitics of the actual poets, there is a marked difference between the tracks recorded in studio and those from live performances. Of the eight poems recorded, the final track—of sections 43–49 of the fifty-one-section poem “Boringkén”—stands out for being the only one not recorded in a studio. Instead, the recording featured is a live performance from the *Noricua BBQ and Summit* in June 2005. That year, Urayoán Noel, Libertad Guerra, and Monzo López founded *Noricua*, the South Bronx–based Puerto Rican poetry and performance collective. Noel explains the group’s name as “the label we came up with to describe our shared aesthetic and sensibility... [W]e are Boricuas of radical negativity (the “no” in “Noricua”) but also constructivists who embrace art, and the city itself, as becoming, as shareable experience” (Noel 2014b, 10). The focus on live performances instead of publication is both innovative and nostalgic; there is a clear antitechnological turn that values visibility and audibility over legibility. As Noel puts it, “Our insistence on live performance has to do with seeking out alternatives to 2.0 culture ... [and] its obsession with gadgets and wikis and cloud sourcing at the expense of imagination and experimentation” (Noel 2014b, 12). The performance of poems, songs and skits is seen as a singular event, an embodied moment of resistance that pushes back against the hypertechnological repression of marginalized bodies in urban spaces. While releasing a recording of a spontaneous political performance may seem paradoxical, the “Boringken” audio synthesizes the ways in which sound technology can be useful in breaking up homogeneous soundscapes. The added benefits of audience interaction and the technical glitches that come with the recorded live performance makes this track an essential case study in the possibilities of a decolonizing project based on countersounds.

The track “Boringkén XLIII–XLIX” begins with an “Ok” not found in the print version of the poem, immediately declaring the performance’s autonomy. Noel then implores his audience to sing along, highlighting his understanding of poetry composition as a collective endeavor.<sup>15</sup> By joining physically present voices instead of virtual ones, Noel challenges the monopoly of hypertechnology over connection and solidarity, reminding the audience and the album listener of the importance of interpersonal contact. Noel tries to make their voices go higher with each syllable of “Bo-ring-kén”—he asks, “What’s the highest you can go, guys?”—pushing for a higher tone but also a louder collective voice that can be heard over all the other intrusive sounds of the city. The audience is asked to push the limits of their voices, to recognize the body’s essential role in asserting political agency. Pronouncing each part with his own shrill voice, Noel continues to give more instructions and encouragement to his audience in both Spanish and English, reflecting the bilingual nature of this poetic project and recognizing heterogeneous urban sonic space within which solidarities may be forged. His voice maintains a comically high pitch; at some moments in the recording he is barely able to push out his words. As a countersound, his piercing vocals cut through other noises and reposition the subject as an independent political actor within a chaotic soundscape.

Challenging modes of listening, Noel’s voice occasionally imitates the squeaks and distortions from the accompanying guitar playing behind him. These moments conflate the human voice and mechanical noise, making audible the political potential of countersounds often filtered out by more produced audio tracks. Noel’s imitation of those sonic by-products marks them less as incidental sounds and more as central

<sup>15</sup> Edwards (2016) highlights the importance of promoting active audience participation in constructing musical anticolonialism.



parts of the performance's counterpolitics. Throughout the performance, the listener can hear moments in which the recording equipment picks up barely audible messages between Noel and the band behind him. Though not originally meant to be part of the poem, these flashes add to the idea of performance as a collective experience and highlight the capacity of recording technologies to intervene in these intimate moments. At one point in the recording, just after section 45 of the print version of the poem, Noel is partially heard communicating something more urgent to the people around him, as if he had pulled himself away from the microphone to discuss a technical issue. The next section starts behind the music's suggested cue, and Noel returns to the microphone while jokingly quipping "Boricua style." Beyond the opportunity to audibly witness the imperfections of a live performance, this moment also encapsulates Noel's relationship to sound technology in his poetry: he relies on it to record and perform his work, but part of the contemporary condition that he describes in his poems involves the continuous struggle with and adaptation to different technological obstacles. At another point in the poem, at the end of section 48, the feed from the microphone goes completely out. Noel continues to perform the poem as others rush to fix the sound system. While using sound equipment to amplify his voice and message, Noel shows the fallibility of technology and the fact that the voice can continue speaking even when the machines fail it. These moments may be accidental, but his inclusion of this specific recording to a CD full of more engineered sounds shows a desire to show the roles of noise and messiness within this sonic project.

Tying audibility to visibility, the recording equipment is also able to catch the corporeal nature of Noel's performance as he returns to the microphone after a conversation with the band. As he moves closer to his original spot, his voice crescendos back into his original poem, intensifying the lyrics and showing how sound recordings can also document the physical movements of performing bodies. These accidental countersounds—though one could argue that the release of a recorded live performance implies a desire to include these sonic imperfections—demonstrate the role of sound in positioning the body and preparing it to reassert political and cultural visibility. The recording ends with a rock star–like closing note that merges Noel's voice with the guitar, followed by an audible applause from the audience that is picked up by the microphone. It should be noted that had Noel continued with the next stanza, he would have read the following:

Todos somos portavoces  
 Del caducar de las cosas  
 En marquesinas astrosas  
 Y condominios atroces  
 De las flemas y las toses  
 De una tribu que agoniza  
 Entre la fiebre y la frisa;  
 ¡Por fin los buenos hermanos,  
 Cogiditos de la mano,  
 Se murieron de la risa! (Noel 2008, 86)

As an intertextual experience that connects the live performance with the written poem, "Boringkén" stages an acoustic intervention that calls on others to be part of a collective voice, reminding reader and listener that we are all spokespeople. This collective voice speaks out against materialism and invokes tribes, hand-holding, and signs of the early stages of the formation of a diasporic consciousness, all provoked by Noel's decolonizing countersounds. The voice is exalted, along with laughter and applause; these poetic countersounds, both in print and performed, come together to contest exclusionary acoustic regimes and redefine urban soundscapes as based on solidarity instead of cacophony.

## Conclusions

During a 2016 reading of *Buzzing Hemisphere/Rumor hemisférico* (2015) at the Resistencia Bookstore in Austin, Texas, Noel performed a poem while improvising with a music-producing app on his smartphone. The accompanying sounds vacillated between background music that accentuated the flow of the poetic lines and intrusive noises that distracted the audience and forced them to listen even more actively. The effect challenges assumptions of mobile technology consumption, asking the audience members to consider how they can use the technological advancements around them in creative ways and how they can redefine cultural production within repressive sonic systems. In this particular reading, halfway through the poem an error message appeared on the screen. The app had unexpectedly quit, unable to keep up with Noel's energetic performance. Just as when the microphone feed dropped in the recording of "Boringkén"



XLIII–XLIX,” Noel did not hesitate or attempt to fix the technical glitch; he continued improvising. These moments of imperfection both challenge the assumed dominance of digital technology and reassert the performing body as the center of any counterpolitical project.

While Noel’s work shows the pervasive and oppressive presence of modern technology, it also highlights the cracks in those hypertechnological regimes where human resistance is possible and how marginalized voices and countersounds can reembody and reposition the diasporic subject. The imperfect translation within the title of *Buzzing Hemisphere/Rumor hemisférico* previews the collection’s attempt to problematize the way in which linguistic differences and technology mediate communication, including with mechanical translations. In various parts of the collection, Noel calls out the ritualization of gadget culture, muses on terms like *operating system* and *status updates* to think about how technology-driven vocabulary has invaded individual functions, and laughs at how a blank cellphone screen has come to embody Sartre’s version of hell:

dislocations  
     diasporas  
 all is displaced  
     even in this swamp  
 that makes invisible  
     my gadget’s screen  
 the voice is scared away  
     the battery dies  
 no plug  
     no exit. (Noel 2016, 25)

Noel positions this issue not only as a general human problem but specifically as an issue for diasporic subjects, who often rely on virtual connections to maintain their communities. The humor with which Noel makes these critiques of hypertechnological culture, along with his reliance on sound apps during his live performances, makes for a complex take on technology that both warns against its dangers and uses it as a tool for challenging oppressive structures.

While sound technology can be used to construct exclusionary sonic modernities that exclude marginalized bodies, it can also be used to amplify and disseminate the voices that promote decolonizing counterpolitics. Noel’s poetry opens a discursive space in which sounds and countersounds attempt to construct or subvert the acoustic architectures that promote economic, political, and cultural repression. His intentionally hemispheric perspective on identity and politics opens up discussions about how diasporic voices continue to contribute to and reshape a poetics of the Americas.

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## Author Information

Samuel Ginsburg is a lecturer in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of Texas at Austin, where he also received his PhD. His work can be found in *Sargasso: A Journal of Caribbean Literature* and *Alambique: Revista académica de ciencia ficción y fantasía*.

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