

**Sound, Technology, and Power**  
**COMS 608/Sound Studies—Winter 2018**  
Mondays 14:30-17:30, Arts W5

Professor Jonathan Sterne

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**Prospectus**

This year's iteration of the seminar on sound studies will focus primarily on recent work that deals with sound and power, and sound and technology. Sometimes these themes will be considered explicitly in relation to one another, sometimes they will be considered separately, though as will become clear, power and technology are always interrelated, it's just a matter of perspective. What can theoretical advances from work on sound offer to the critique of power, especially in a moment of worldwide neo-fascist ferment? Conversely, how can new perspectives on power change the way we understand sound? What can scholarship on sound offer to the analysis of technology in a moment of great technological turnover, real connections between technological and social change, and a high concentration of tech industry bullshit? How does a critique of technology shape our understanding of changing sound media? Some weeks we will do whole books, some weeks we will do articles. Students will write weekly responses focused on improving their skills as academic writers in the humanities and interpretive social sciences; the final project will provide an opportunity to revise and expand one of these short papers.

**Required Readings**

Required books will be available at THE WORD bookstore, 469 Milton St. 514-845-5640, <http://www.wordbookstore.ca/> . Please note that they take cash or check only. Online sellers obviously will accept credit cards if you go that route. Books are also on 3-hour reserve at the Humanities and Social Sciences Library. For this seminar, it is strongly recommended that you work with paper copies of books, rather than digital copies.

Required Books:

Alejandra Bronfman, *Isles of Noise: Sonic Media in the Caribbean*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016. 978-1469628691

Michael Denning, *Noise Uprising: The Audiopolitics of a World Musical Revolution*. New York: Verso, 2015. 978-1781688564

Louise Meintjes, *Sound of Africa!: Making Music Zulu in a South African Studio*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003. 978-0-8223-3014-1

Alexander Rehding, *Beethoven's Symphony No. 9*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. 9780190299705

Jennifer Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*. New York: New York University Press, 2016. 978-1479889341

Peter Szendy, *All Ears: The Aesthetics of Espionage*, translated by Roland Végső. New York: Fordham University Press, 2017. 978-0823273966

In addition, all required and recommended articles and chapters will be made available to students through the course website or other means.

## Class Schedule

**Bring printed copies of readings to class**

A link to help you do the readings:

Paul Edwards, How to Read a Book, <http://pne.people.si.umich.edu/PDF/howtoread.pdf>

8 Jan: **Apologia**

Recommended (aka, "what is the prof's deal?"):

Jonathan Sterne, "Hello." *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, 1-30 (notes: 353-360). Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

\_\_\_\_\_, "Format Theory." *MP3: The Meaning of a Format*, 1-30 (notes 247-258). Durham: Duke University Press, 2012.

\_\_\_\_\_, "Sonic Imaginations." *The Sound Studies Reader*, 1-17. London: Routledge, 2012.

No writing due.

15 Jan: **The Recording Studio**

Louise Meintjes, *Sound of Africa: Making Music Zulu in a South African Studio*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

22 Jan: **The Listening Ear of Power**

Jennifer Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*. New York: New York University Press, 2016.

29 Jan: **Early Modernity**

Bonnie Gordon, "What Mr. Jefferson Didn't Hear." In *Rethinking Difference in Music Scholarship*, edited by Olivia Bloechl, Melanie Lowe, and Jeffrey Kallberg, 108–32. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Bonnie Gordon, "It's Not About the Cut: The Castrato's Instrumentalized Song." *New Literary History* 46, no. 4 (autumn 2015): 647–87.

Richard Cullen Rath, "The Howling Wilderness," *How Early America Sounded*, 145-172 (notes 213-217). Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003.

5 Feb: **Circulation 1**

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

12 Feb: **Circulation 2**

Alejandra Bronfman, *Isles of Noise: Sonic Media in the Caribbean*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016.

19 Feb: **Surveillance, Two Ways**

Peter Szendy, *All Ears: An Aesthetics of Espionage*, translated by Roland Végső. New York: Fordham University Press, 2017.

Stefan Helmreich, "Gravity's Reverb: Listening to Space-Time, or Articulating the Sounds of Gravitational-Wave Detection." *Cultural Anthropology* 31, no. 4 (2016): 464–92.

Also: Vote for technology menu week.

26 Feb: **Fascism and Its Fallout**

Carolyn Birdsall, Chapters 1-3 (31-139) of *Nazi Soundscapes: Sound, Technology and Urban Space in Germany, 1933-1945*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012. *The rest is recommended.*

Lilian Radovac, "Muting Dissent: New York City's Sound Device Ordinance and the Liberalization of the Public Sphere." *Radical History Review*, no. 121 (January 2015): 32-50.

Roland Wittje, "Acoustics Goes Back to War: Mass Mobilization and Remilitarization of Acoustics Research." *The Age of Electroacoustics: Transforming Science and Sound*, 173-188 (notes 244-247). Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016.

Bryce Peake, "Listening Like White Nationalists at a Civil Rights Rally." *Journal of Sonic Studies*, no. 14 (2017). <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/375960/375961>.

Tech Menu books will be announced. Order yours.

5 March: **Reading Week! Post pictures of palm trees to the course website.**



Writing assignment: decide what your final project will be. Write a 500-750 word proposal Come to class and we will discuss in small groups. We will also discuss what we learned about sound this term.

## Course Requirements and Expectations

### Etiquette:

1. Full and complete attendance, attention, participation, listening and reading (of required texts). I expect the very best you can give.
2. Good faith and good humor toward your colleagues in the classroom. For both: disagreements are expected and encouraged, but please keep nitpicking to a minimum; personal attacks and intimidation are not acceptable under any circumstances. If you have something critical to say, be prepared to explain how the piece could be improved given what the author hoped to achieve. Follow the Golden Rule. Encourage basic questions as well as advanced ones. If you don't know something, admit it. You are probably not alone. Finally, we want to avoid seek-and-destroy hermeneutics. Therefore, students are allowed one (1) seek-and-destroy analysis of a reading per term, for when you just can't stand it. But choose wisely. Once you've used it, you've used it.
3. Your job as a participant is to listen actively to what others have to say and advance the discussion. If you are confident contributor use your confidence for good and not evil. Help bring others into discussion, refer to your classmates by name, and be positive about the contributions of those who do not say as much.
4. While personal anecdotes are allowed, keep in mind this is a PhD seminar. Others may disagree with your interpretation of your experience. This is encouraged and allowed. If you are not comfortable with this, do not share your story.
5. Awkward silences and hesitation are okay. Don't feel you need to rush to speak and don't worry if you need a little time to articulate something. Contributing to class discussion is more than the frequency of the times your hand goes up and the number of words you say. If you are struggling to articulate something, that's probably a sign that you are saying something that is new and not obvious.
6. Difficult content: There's been a lot of talk in the press about content warnings and student comfort in the classroom. As your prof, I will never do anything intentionally to shock or traumatize students. At the same time, it's our job to discuss difficult subjects in class, and nobody can predict the effect some materials may have on someone. I will try and give previews of the kinds of content you will encounter before you encounter it. If I forget, feel free to ask. If you are having difficulty dealing with a class discussion or a reading or recording, you may raise the issue as part of the discussion (keeping in mind #4 above), or you may simply

discretely step out of class. A note to the prof would be helpful after the fact so that we know what happened and don't think you just got up and left.

### **Technology Policy**

This course will encourage the thoughtful use of scholarly technologies such as talking and reading, computers and the internet, pen and paper, projection and chalkboards, etc.

For our "talking about ideas" components, you will use a writing utensil and paper (unless you bring me a note from the Office for Students With Disabilities). The classroom will not be an environment of "ambient computing." If you need to open a computer (or any device with a screen, microprocessor and internet connection) to look stuff up, you will do that and then close the device.

If we have group activities, computing devices may be involved, depending on the activity.

We will discuss this technology policy on the first day of class.

### **Product (and % of semester grade):**

#### **I. Participation (20%, assessed cumulatively)**

I expect everyone to participate regularly in class. You should come every week ready to discuss the readings. I notice (and appreciate it) when students make good contributions to the course online or in other ways besides speaking up in class. Please note that I distinguish between quantity and quality. I also notice when students are routinely late and/or absent.

Requirements for class discussion are as follows: good faith, attention to the readings, and relevance to the course. We want to avoid "seek and destroy" sessions. If you have something critical to say, be ready to explain how the piece could be improved. If you disagree with the premise of the piece, then read for what motivates the argument.

If necessary, I will keep a speakers list and call on people.

#### **II. Weekly exercises (20%, due weekly)**

Most weeks, students will be asked to write about sound in a particular way. Your product will be a 500-800 word paper posted on the course website. One or more examples of primary sources will be provided most weeks, but students may choose other sources as they like so long as they fulfil the spirit of the assignment. If you're unsure, check with me. Each assignment is designed to help you a) develop as a writer and b) develop your skills for thinking and writing about sound in tandem. Since class meets on Monday this term, responses should be posted on the MyCourses site by 5pm the Friday before class, however you have an automatic extension until 5pm Sunday before class should you need it. It is phrased this way

because I want to allow for the possibility that you might take time off during the weekend, but I won't need the responses before Sunday evening.

I expect that the writing exercises will be taken seriously on their own terms and followed through to the best of your ability. Students often feel like they need to develop a distinctive writing style, "schtick," set of preferred methods or approaches, or theoretical positions they need to defend. I do not want you to write as "yourself"; I want you to write like a musician might learn someone else's music as a form of practice. This will be explained more fully on the first day of class.

In class, students may be asked to read their exercise aloud as a springboard to discussion. If you are particularly uncomfortable reading aloud in a particular week, you may say so in a private email to me beforehand (but not every week). If you just can't stand the idea of reading your work aloud in class, you can also ask someone else to read it aloud for you. Or we can pass it around and have different people read it aloud.

Escape hatches: most weeks you are expected to do what you are asked (there is a lot of room for interpretation). With exceptions noted above, you may (1) skip writing one week (a week off! Or you can get sick), and (2) you may create and execute an alternative assignment one week so long as it is in the spirit of the course, and otherwise matches the spirit of the assignment (e.g., not advancing your "schtick"). My advice: get the hang of the assignments, then do #2 when you are particularly inspired.

### **III. Portfolio and Extension (60%, due 23 April)**

At the end of the term, you will have a portfolio of materials you have produced. Your final assignment has two parts. These two documents are both due on 23 April at 5pm, on MyCourses. Please note that I plan to be traveling between 18 April and 1 May, so if you want to meet with me about your project, please do so before the 18<sup>th</sup>.

**Part I:** A short reflection paper (approximately 1000-1300 words but I'm not actually counting) that discusses the various writing assignments. Questions you could address include: What would you like to work on as a writer in the future? What did you discover in the process of a single week or over the course of the term? What do you see as you read across the work from some distance? What did you learn about sound? What did you learn about being a scholar?

**Part II:** can take one of three forms.

1. Extend one of your short papers into an approximately 2500-3000 word paper (7-8pp double spaced "spoken" text plus notes/bib); roughly the length of a 15-20 minute conference talk. Build in more material from the course, more thinking, more secondary material. You are also welcome to put it in your voice and connect it to your schtick.

2. You can't stop writing! Same as #1 except it can be the full 20 page double-spaced seminar paper. This option exists because I always write double the amount of prose I try to write. So you can too, if that's your particular problem.
3. Propose an alternative. This needs to be within the spirit of the course, so I am biased toward an academic writing assignment because the whole course is geared toward helping you improve as a writer. I will entertain research-creation, digital humanities and curatorial proposals if they are small-scale, didactic and goal-oriented (as opposed to "exploratory") and meet the same goals #1 or #2 above, which is to produce a piece of scholarly writing that you can then use somewhere down the road as a springboard for something. If you want to go through with this option, a 750-1250 word proposal is due to me on 23 March at 5pm (we'll figure out what to do for the last class if you go this route). It should clearly explain what you plan to do, how and why you can accomplish it by the due date, and how it fulfills the spirit of the assignment. Please note that I won't give incompletes for overambitious projects, even though I love overambitious projects.

### Other Policies

**French:** You have the right to submit your written work in French and some years one or more students in my seminars choose to do so. If you plan to write in French, please get in touch with me during add-drop so we can talk about how to handle it, as I am not particularly good at French. Normally it's not a problem but we should discuss how it will work.

Class discussions are in English, but you are encouraged to resort to French if you can't find the right word in English and we'll figure it out together. You are also welcome to read course materials in French (where they are available in French). Discussions of linguistic and translation differences are a welcome part of the seminar.

**Accommodation:** If you require special accommodations or classroom modifications of any kind, please notify both the professor and Office for Students with Disabilities by the end of the first week in which you are enrolled in the course. They are located in Room RS56, Redpath Library, 398-6009 (voice), 398-8198 (TDD), [<http://www.mcgill.ca/osd/>].

**Nondiscrimination:** If there is something I can do to make the class more hospitable, please let me know. I value equality of opportunity, and human dignity and diversity. In accordance with University policy, I will not tolerate discrimination or harassment on the basis of race, color, ethnic or national origin, civil status, religion, creed, political convictions, language, sex, sexual orientation, social condition, age, personal difference or the use of assistive technology in negotiating that difference. Among other things, this means that you do not have to agree with your teacher, the assigned readings, or the majority of your classmates in order to do well in this course. You are, however, obligated to demonstrate an understanding of the course material *whether or not you agree with it*.

**Auditors:** I would like auditors to participate in the weekly writing exercises for the weeks they will attend, so that everyone in the room is on equal footing. If I grant you permission to audit, you are bound by the same etiquette rules as the enrolled students. There will be exceptions to this policy for days when we have out of town visitors.

### **How to Interpret McGill's Inflated Graduate-Level Grades:**

A: Good work  
 A-: Satisfactory  
 B+: There is a problem with what you submitted  
 B: There is a substantial problem with what you submitted  
 B-: Lowest possible passing grade in a graduate course; indicates a major problem but not a failure  
 C+ or lower: Officially considered a "fail" by the Graduate Studies Office.  
 In rare cases, if your performance on any assignment is not satisfactory, I may ask you to do it again.

**You must complete all the major assignments to pass the course.**

**Late assignments** may not receive written comments and will earn a reduced grade (one increment of letter grade for the first two days, then an increment per day, including weekends). Late weekly papers will not be useful for class and will receive a diminished grade immediately. **It is your responsibility to make sure I receive any assignment you turn in.**

Activities for which you must be present cannot be made up.

**It is also your responsibility to properly back up your work:** keep more than one digital copy of your work. In the case of writing, keep a paper copy as well. I recommend syncing your important documents to a cloud storage service.

**The K contract:** At McGill, grades of incomplete are called "K" grades and they are only supposed to be assigned after the student and professor have agreed upon a contract. I do not give incompletes ("K" grades) except in truly extraordinary personal circumstances that can be documented. K grades revert to "F" grades at the end of the next term unless a contract extension is signed by both professor and student. Extensions also will not be granted except in truly extraordinary circumstances.

**The Passive-Aggressive K:** Should a student fail to complete the requirements for the course and fail to contact me well before my deadline for submission of grades, I will issue a K grade without a contract. Graduate studies, however, still expects a contract to be filed and it will be the student's responsibility to make sure one is submitted. In these circumstances, should the paper be completed at a later date, it will receive a mark. However, students who receive a "K" in this fashion will not be eligible to receive an "A" or "A-" for the course. I will not sign an extension for a K grade that was granted without a contract, and no late paper will be graded

without a K contract being in place beforehand. I also cannot promise comments on a paper submitted after a passive-aggressive K.

**Required Academic Integrity Statement:** McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see [www.mcgill.ca/integrity](http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity) for more information).

**Special Required Emergency Syllabus-Eraser Clause:** In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

### Meta:

