

Radio and the (Trans)gendered Soundscape in 1930s Argentina

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Early and golden age radio in Argentina was a site where gender, citizenship and the public sphere were contested and reconstituted. Exploring issues of gender and radio broadcasting raises intriguing theoretical questions about the relationship between the voice and the body, and in turn between gendered bodies and technology. By breaching traditional boundaries between public and private and separating the voice from any immediate visual referent, radio was a key forum within which anxieties about shifting constructions and hierarchies of gender and sexuality merged with the fantasies and fears provoked by new technologies and by cultural and political massification. The mystery of the radio receiver, in other words, intersected with worries that feminism was creating a new generation of mannish and/or promiscuous women and neurasthenic suspicions that “modern” urban society was making men soft and perhaps even less heterosexual.

“Radio and the (Trans)gendered Soundscape in 1930s Argentina” explores issues of radio and “gender trouble” in 1930s Buenos Aires, Argentina, which was home to one of the larger, more prosperous radio markets in the Americas at that time. Known as the “infamous decade”, the 1930s were a time of increasing class and gender-based tensions in Argentina, and the end of the decade saw the consolidation of new nationalist populist coalitions reflecting this new age of both mass media and mass politics. As elsewhere, early Argentine radio offered a brief window of opportunity for voices that directly challenged the traditional gendered soundscape (female radio commentators, radio “drag” performances, etc.). But these dissonant radio voices met with significant backlash from those who saw radio as a vehicle of “anti-culture”, immorality and subversion of “Argentine” values.

This essay explores ways in which radio voices performed gender, especially moments when those voices challenged and subverted the gendered order and disrupted the gendered soundscape via the introduction of unorthodox pairings of voice and speech or voice and seen body. Radio’s capacity to elasticize identity construction is grounded in the medium’s separation of sound from any immediate visual referent. Sound emanating from a radio receiver is never “synched” with any image. Moreover, the intimacy and immediacy of the human voice communicates veracity and invites the listener to come up with her/his own imagery (in the “mind’s eye”) to suit the sounds and voices they are hearing. For all these reasons radio is invocatory of the cultural imaginary in ways, perhaps, that visual media are not. And radio stimulated that cultural imaginary in ways that evoked both fantasy and fear. As a sound medium, in other words, radio has the capacity to overflow existing boundaries of space and culture, at the same time that it plays to (and thus reinscribed) those same boundaries. Radio transvestism existed in the tension between these two trajectories: as an example of the medium’s capacity to transcend traditional boundaries and as a straw “man” for those seeking to reimpose those boundaries.

Using the popular radio magazines as its main source, this paper will examine and compare campaigns against both female and transgendered male voices on the airwaves in 1930s Buenos Aires. The Western tradition has long considered women's oratory as irrational, immodest, sinful and even unhealthy. These discourses resurfaced with a vengeance during radio's golden age. In early 1930s Buenos Aires, for example, the radio press mocked female commentators and poetry recitationists as "vulgar", immodest and hard on the ears. This story is placed alongside a lower volume, but still significant, campaign against "men singing women's songs" on the radio during the early 1930s. Some feared that radio was providing a platform and a cover for the vocalizations of male homosexuals and/or transvestites, fears which played into homophobic nationalist discourses that were on the rise in Argentina during this decade. This paper seeks to draw out the links between these two campaigns, and to point out the multiple (albeit overlapping) ways in which radio challenged the gendered soundscape, and in turn provoking campaigns that sought to realign radio with so-called "traditional" values, putting dissonant voices back in their place (in the case of women) or silencing them altogether (in the case of "radio transvestism"). In so doing, it underscores the deeply gendered aspects of campaigns to "sanitize" broadcasting and argues that the "gendered soundscape" is an important category for analyzing the "crisis" of 1930s broadcasting generally.

This paper also engages with existing scholarship on Argentine gender anxieties and popular culture in 1930s Argentina, particularly that dealing with tango and soccer (*fútbol*), and thus contributes to the larger process of moving radio out of the 'blind spot' of the cultural and political history of mid-twentieth-century Latin America. At the same time, this project also contributes to a broader process of integrating the history of women and gender with the history of radio and sound. "Radio and the (Trans)gendered Soundscape" is part of a larger book-length study of women/gender and golden age radio in Buenos Aires, Argentina and Montevideo Uruguay. *Ethereal Citizens: Women and Radio in the Río de la Plata, 1930s-1940s*, traces the history of women's voices and the reception of those voices across times and genres, and compares and contrasts two important and overlapping South American radio markets operating in two distinct political and economic contexts.

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