
Montserrat (a phono-archaeology)

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Abstract

Ortega Ayala's artwork has focused since 2012 on the ways in which societies and individuals remember, forget, or repress their past. The overarching title for these works is *From the Pit of Et Cetera*. 'Montserrat (a phono-archaeology)' (2017-2020) sits within this framework. It focuses on a British overseas territory in the Caribbean that was devastated by a hurricane in 1989 and a volcanic eruption in 1995 that left much of its territory in ruins. Via a film the viewer travels through the remains of the island, including the former local radio station and the legendary AIR recording studios. Its soundtrack incorporates acoustic experiments conducted in the renowned studios and music and voices discovered in tapes and vinyls unearthed from volcanic ash at the radio station and other sites. It also highlights sounds of the island's flora, fauna, and natural surroundings that are embedded in pop albums that were recorded at AIR in the 80s, before the disaster.

Even though most of this pop music continues to be played in radio stations, supermarkets, and homes around the world, many listeners don't know that this important sonic heritage of the island is there, hiding in plain sight. The article discusses these findings and the implications it has on the island's neglected history within a Latin American context.

Keywords: collective memory, Caribbean history, hiding in plain sight, intersperse history, overseas territories, phono-archaeology, sound

He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. Above all, he must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil. For the "matter itself" is no more than the strata which yield their long-sought secrets...¹

— Walter Benjamin

In a curved archipelago in the Caribbean Sea there is an island called Montserrat. It sits alongside other volcanic islands referred to as the Lesser Antilles that are almost all overseas territories, Montserrat being one of the United Kingdom.²

Like many places in Latin America after it was 'discovered' by Columbus it became a disputed territory. In the seventeenth century Irish settlers arrived. Soon after it was briefly occupied by France before coming under the control of England. In the years that followed, Sub-Saharan African slaves were transported to Montserrat to work on sugar plantations established by the colonisers. By 1768, the slave population numbered 10,177.³ In 1783 the island was 'restored' to Britain via the Treaty of Versailles⁴ and when slavery was abolished fifty years later⁵ all slaves were 'liberated' (or "fettered in two ways" as Edouard Glissant would say).⁶

Time passed, and plantations were replaced by hotels and golf courses to host tourists, many of them British citizens who came to vacation at the overseas territory. In 1989 Category 4 Hurricane Hugo devastated large parts of the territory, then, in 1995 when the island was finally recovering from the storm, the previously dormant Soufrière Hills volcano erupted. This volcano produces fast-moving, billowing clouds of ash, gases, and volcanic rock that destroy almost everything in its path.⁷ Many eruptions took place after 1995, which slowly buried numerous sites around the island, including the capital city of Plymouth, creating a large uninhabitable exclusion zone that spans more than half of the territory of the island to the south.⁸

From the series *From the Pit of Et Cetera, Montserrat* (a phono-archaeology),
Fieldnote 03-12-18 – 6929
(Soufriere Hills Volcano).



Volcanic sites give us a glimpse of how the earth's crust was formed and also reveal how a new, outer surface can replace a previous one. In the case of Montserrat's former capital the ground level now coincides with the tops of the buildings, creating a monumental palimpsest with countless stories beneath.

From the series *From the Pit of Et Cetera, Montserrat* (a phono-archaeology), *Fieldnote 24-04-17 – 8958* (Plymouth).



In 2012 I began the research for a series of works that would focus on collective memory — a social construct in which forgetting and remembering are done collectively as proposed by Maurice Halbwachs.⁹ Film, photography, sculpture, painting, 3D printing, performance, choreography, and sound are some of the mediums used in this series. It has the overarching title of “From the Pit of Et Cetera” and “*Montserrat (a phono-archaeology)*” sits within this framework.

With the intention of producing a work for this series I travelled to the island for the first time in 2017, without having a specific idea of what I was going to do there. As I conducted fieldwork in different sites within the exclusion zone I kept running across objects that contained sounds. One of these sites was the former Radio Antilles station located near the destroyed capital city. There, I encountered a large array of vinyl records and reel-to-reel tapes abandoned or buried under volcanic ash.



From the series *From the Pit of Et Cetera, Montserrat* (a phono-archaeology),
Fieldnote 20-06-19 – 7395
(Radio Antilles).

On another occasion I stumbled upon a great number of damaged 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ rpm LPs and 45 rpm vinyl records in a ruined bar. As I continued my research on the history of the island I also found out that George Martin (later Sir George), the producer of the Beatles, had opened a state-of-the-art recording studio there called Air Studios Montserrat, after falling in love with the island during a visit in 1979. It became a satellite of the AIR (Associated Independent Recordings) studios he had founded in the UK.¹⁰ It was smaller than those in London – approximately six by seven metres – but had all the comforts, including a lounge, a bar, a swimming pool, and accommodation, which made it an ideal place for musicians to travel to and make music, away from many of the distractions of large cities.

From the series *From the Pit of Et Cetera, Montserrat* (a phono-archaeology),
Fieldnote 21-06-19 – 7494
(Air Studios).



The studio's equipment was highly advanced and included one of the most innovatory consoles of the time, the Neve A4792. For over a decade more than seventy albums were recorded or mixed either partly or entirely at Air Studios, by well-known rock and pop musicians such as Lou Reed, Paul McCartney, The Police, Elton John, Duran Duran, Eric Clapton, Dire Straits, Black Sabbath, Rush, and The Rolling Stones.¹¹ Air Studios now sits on the border of the exclusion zone and may be in or out of it depending on the volcanic activity. The property is engulfed in tropical overgrowth, the wooden floors are rotting, some ceilings have collapsed and the pool is now full of murky water. The speakers and the console still exist but only because they were taken elsewhere or repurposed. Otherwise, there isn't much equipment left.

*From the series From the Pit
of Et Cetera, Montserrat
(a phono-archaeology),
Fieldnote 21-06-19 – 7568
(Air Studios).*



All of these multi-sited findings led me to embark on what can be described as a phono-archaeological exploration of the audio material encountered on the island and of the seventy-plus albums that were recorded there. The aim was to find sounds, noises, or even reverberations that were connected to the island's past. This involved unearthing the vinyls and reel-to-reel tapes from the ash, thoroughly cleaning the records and the tapes, classifying them, extracting whatever sounds I could and restoring them digitally. I had to track down the albums that were recorded at Air Studios-Montserrat in second-hand record shops in New Zealand and overseas, purchase them, listen to them at length and locate sounds or reverberations in some of them. In all of this material I ended up finding sounds of local fauna, recordings of choirs singing in churches that no longer existed, radio shows advising the population on how to prepare for hurricanes, several takes of an unknown singer rapping about St. Patrick's Day and its meaning for Montserratians, a sermon by a preacher from Pennsylvania taped over a special radio program dedicated to Bob Marley, and music from many parts of the world that challenged my narrow-minded assumption that tropical islanders would only be listening to calypso, reggae, or Caribbean beats.

I was also allowed by the island trustee of Sir George Martin's estate to visit the ruins of the recording studio and conduct sound experiments which included capturing the resonant frequencies of the main recording studio at that time. Some of the material retrieved was given to musicians based in different parts of the world to recreate the sounds to make the soundtrack for a film proposed as a mnemonic study of the island's acoustic past. The remaining retrieved material is used in live ephemeral soundscape performances, made in collaboration with a DJ, that are accompanied by paintings, sculptures, archival material, photographic field-notes, and microscopic photographs of some of the vinyl records found buried under the ashes.



From the series *From the Pit of Et Cetera, Montserrat* (a phono-archaeology),
Fieldnote 22-03-21 — WD 14.6mm
(x300 view of recovered vinyl via Electron Microscope).

The pop albums produced there and the voices and other sounds found in the vinyl records and reel-to-reel tapes randomly disinterred from the ash became a way to connect with the history of the island, albeit in a piecemeal way. The project also revealed that I (like many people around the world) had unknowingly already listened to some sounds from Montserrat. They were embedded in 80's pop music records, tucked away inside a global cultural product like a xenolith. These sounds have now out-lived not only the animals but perhaps also the people that uttered them and the sites where they were produced. They continue to live in a hauntological form. Jacques Derrida proposed the idea of spectres from the past persistently returning, being present but not being there, going and coming back like revenants.¹² But also music critics have conferred the term 'hauntological' to the musicians who produced electronic music in the early 2000s, that paradoxically no longer felt "futuristic" and instead sounded "ghostly."¹³ Examples of this are bands like The Focus Group or Belbury Poly of the Ghost Box label that made music using a variety of vintage sampled sounds, including the vocals from a 1908 recording cylinder that, after manipulation, enabled a dead man to sing a new song called *Caermaen*.¹⁴ The fragments of sound of the flora, fauna, ocean, and weather of Montserrat that were used to create atmosphere in pop music albums from the 80s continues to be played, perhaps even at this very moment in a supermarket, in a bar, or in someone's car somewhere in the world, constantly "coming back"¹⁵ as Derrida suggested, from the past. And the objects themselves, the vinyls, have now become objects that contain multiple heritages, unknowingly representing more than one culture. The film, on the other hand, will also play from now and into the future, the voices and sounds literally unearthed from the ashes, subverting their condemnation to oblivion and to the remorseless passing of time by rehashing them into a 'new' reality and bestowing upon them the quality of a homonym.

And finally, this project also considers the notion of the "Invisible Caribbean" proposed by Virginia Perez-Ratton.¹⁶ For her, this term described the systematic invisibility of Afro-Caribbean culture.

If we consider the etymological origin of the word 'hurricane,' for example, we don't usually link it to the Caribbean: but it originates from the word 'Hurakán' that the Taíno people¹⁷ used to describe the large storms that hit the islands.¹⁸ And, despite there not being a singular identity that permeates the entire Latin American or North American region, but rather a large mixture of backgrounds, indigenous traditions, colonial histories, and varied visions of the future, there is a tendency to look at culture in that region in a hegemonic way; looking towards 'Latin-American' or to 'North American' culture and excluding the Caribbean, treating it as a detached enclave from the region. But its history is entwined in some of the words we use, and as this project proposes, in some of the music we listen or dance to, always there, hiding in plain sight, and when it's noticed it offers a lapsus in the pervasive predominant historical narrative and in the hegemonic view of culture in that region.

Endnotes

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7. "Island of Fire: The Natural Spectacle of the Soufrière Hills Volcano", eds. Adam Stinton, Henry Odber, and Paul Cole (Montserrat: Montserrat Volcano Observatory, 2011), 5-7.
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Biographical Note

Raul Ortega Ayala is a Mexican-born visual artist and associate professor at Whiti o Rehua-School of Art at Massey University in Aotearoa New Zealand. His research-based practice is influenced by anthropology and developed via extensive, multi-sited investigations. Recently, he produced a series of projects that explore collective memory, social amnesia, and historical detritus which include works like *The Zone*, that focuses on the area in the Ukraine evacuated after the nuclear accident in Chernobyl. And Montserrat (a phono-archaeology), referred to above.

His work has been shown in solo and group exhibitions in venues such as the Frans Hals and Kunstmuseum Den Haag, Netherlands; Delfina Foundation, Liverpool Biennial and Tramway, UK; Arp Museum, Germany; El Eco and Museo Jumex, Mexico; and Te Tuhi, New Zealand, amongst others.

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