

David Novak. 2013. *Japanoise: Music at the Edge of Circulation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Reviewed by Andrés García Molina

First, a disclaimer: this is not a review if “book review” implies the existence of an explicit map or the provision of a summary of sorts. *Japanoise* is an extraordinary book that requires something else, a different strategy. Just like a project around Noise with a capital N (a musical genre), and noise (a more general concept), required from David Novak a different kind of engagement, a different kind of listening, a different kind of writing. Novak’s *Japanoise*, based on over ten years of fieldwork in Japan and North America, provides no transparent, easy definitions, nor does it strive to produce a definitive history of Noise in any sense, whether as genre or metaphor. And while Novak’s work pushes towards an approximation to Noise as a potent critique of many things (some of which will be addressed in this review), in *Japanoise* he manages to investigate generative questions around Noise without merely opposing it to other categories (like music, signal, or information), enacting an all-out critique of a tendency to define objects and subjects too neatly in ethnomusicological and anthropological research. In Novak’s hands, Noise can refer to an underground genre of music, forms of circulation, a commodity, and everyday techniques of creating and listening.

Methodologically, Novak’s work is an intensive application of how to engage with a slippery subject, one that appears to be virtually inapprehensible and not reducible to a straight, linear story with a set of discretely identifiable ancestors sitting atop a family tree. Part of Novak’s merit lies in resisting writing an account that adduces a limited group of people as calling the shots or having direct or singular accountability. Any traceable lines of kinship and communication, relation, and exchange are overlapping and uneven. Similarly, Noise cannot be reduced to a single place or places. Novak admits it is constantly changing, as ubiquitous as it is unperceived. In that sense, Novak’s style of ethnography is vigorously detectivesque minus the fetish. Novak writes that ethnographic writing can be “as much a force of ambiguity as of explanation,” admitting that the project he embarks upon might be “unsettling” (26).

*Japanoise* is careful in and committed to writing against exoticization and reification. And while there is no clear family tree, throughout the book we are presented with a host of characters, people of bone and flesh with first and last names; at stake is nothing less than livelihoods and

ways of being. There are performers of varying renown and those who travel from near and far to hear their performances. *Japanoise* follows the circuitous paths activated by Noise through multiple cities: Osaka, Tokyo, and Kyoto in Japan; San Francisco, New York City, Providence, and London, Ontario in North America. Within those cities, there are multiple places that Noise—and consequently, Novak—treads: record stores, live performance venues, coffee shops, bars, recording studios, radio stations, living rooms, even the intimacy of headphones blasting dangerously loud sound waves. And Noise travels in various forms: mail-order albums and cassettes, in-person exchanges, subsequent listening sessions at home or in public spaces, but also through live performances.

In 233 richly detailed, poetically descriptive pages, Novak manages to also pay equal attention to the wider historical contexts of these histories of circulation, all the while maintaining an accessible tone that is unwaveringly rigorous. Novak's admittance of unsettling-ness, "I will not touch down in particular sites for long," is deceptively simple (26). For describing a performance that takes place, say at a small bar in Osaka, also means knowing about the history of that small bar. Who runs it, who owns it, who else has performed there, what kind of public goes there, which kinds of practices are enacted. It might also mean knowing about that neighborhood's history. If a performance is part of an annual event, say, like the No Fun Fest, Novak doesn't downplay the importance of knowing which record labels might be involved, who the organizers might be, which other festivals and publics might intersect. Novak also discusses a range of magazines that were and a part of Noise's circulation, drawing on the various kinds of discourse presented in different publications. Entering a record store, too, is not simply entering a record store: in Novak's treatment, it also means paying attention to the broader history entailed, to the store's connections in town, nationally, and internationally. Or take, for example, Novak's engagement with Drugstore, an alternative listening "free space" in 1980s Kyoto, a site that played an important role in the coming together of a generation of Noisicians. But engaging with Drugstore means, for Novak, also engaging with the broader historical sociality of "listening cafés" in Japan, and in particular, the institution of *jazu-kissa*. Novak guides us through a particular way of listening that consolidated across Japan in the post-War decades. In doing so he engages a particular history of jazz circulation and a broader history of US-Japan relations. Novak is complex and thorough in his treatment of encounters between the United States and Japan, encounters that "have historically been un-

equal, but unequal in particularly repetitive, cyclical ways” (25). Novak explores these “asymmetries” in detail, asserting that his “extension of Japan studies into a context of transnational reception . . . is also a step toward globalizing American studies through the circuits of Japanese media. In both contexts, distinct projects of cultural and subcultural identity emerged from shared but separate loops of consumption” (25). Novak seems equally well informed and familiar with Japanese scholarship and forms of popular culture as he is with those of the West. All of this, of course, implied doing an impressive amount of fine-grained ethnographic research and archival work.

And despite all the specificity that at times comes through in *Japanoise*, Novak insists on a productive paradox: he writes rigorously while taking head-on the challenges posed by a reflexive authorial voice that does not strive to be authoritative. In a gesture I read as densely significant, the introduction of *Japanoise* does not end with the usual roadmap characteristic of Anglo-American academic publications: “In Chapter 1, I explore . . . Chapter 2 traces an outline of . . . Chapters 3 and 4 theorize . . .” In leading us through detailed histories, in presenting with great care the different work ethics and aesthetics of a wide range of international artists like Merzbow, Incapacitants, Sonic Youth, Masonna, Nihilism Spasm Band, Hijokaidan, and their numerous ilk, Novak consistently resists any totalizing act, steadily writing against a style of singularity that has been uncritically produced and received in our disciplines. For maps, as Novak puts it, also draw the outsider.

*Japanoise* is also a sustained critique of Jacques Attali’s seminal *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1977), a critique that is only spelled out explicitly at the very end of the book, in the Epilogue. Novak presses the fact that what Attali means by noise presupposes a narrow, Romantic understanding of what “music” is. Attali limits noise to the outside, as a noise that can only exist in the margins and “can never enter into the spinning wheel of musical systems” (231). Attali’s noise is strictly negative, disallowing any possibility of it having any kind of productive presence in a circulatory present; it is too neatly the opposite of music. The Noise Novak describes

did not emerge through its pure distinctions from Music but in the overlapping and repetitive feedback between “noise” and “music,” “local” and “global,” “old” and “new” that generates new modes of musical and social experience. Even when these fluctuations of identity, production, mediation, and creative practice are drawn into specific and observable loops of sound and performance, Noise does not settle. (232)

Along similar lines he writes, “Any story of Noise must account for the transnational circuitry of its subjects, and also acknowledge their dogged pursuit of antisocial, antihistorical, antimusical obscurity. This multisited struggle against cultural identification makes Noise extremely difficult to place” (15).

Novak also writes about the lower case noise, a broader concept deployed in discourses about technology, globalization, race, class, ethnicity, modernity, and the environment, in disciplines ranging from history to musicology, anthropology, media studies, to science and technology studies. In critiquing such uses of “noise” as a concept, Novak draws attention to how “[s]ome narratives take for granted its *unity as a sonic object*” (229; emphasis mine). What simultaneously becomes apparent is a powerful critique of the way boundedness is too easily attributed to objects of study, how a *sonic object’s unity* is indeed often left unproblematized.

Novak’s theoretical agenda is particularly rich in the complex interweaving of Noise, circulation, and feedback. His understanding of circulation is one that openly challenges existing models that “represent circulation as something that takes place *between* cultures” (17; emphasis in the original). In a radical move, in privileging the concept of feedback, Novak proposes that “circulation itself *constitutes* culture” (17; emphasis in the original). It is also important to note that he sustains this position without simply proposing another version of medial determinism à la Friedrich Kittler. At the same time, Novak is deeply concerned with “how technological mediation transformed the global scale of cultural exchange, even as it undermined its historical continuity” (17). His account is not simply about how culture travels and appears changed elsewhere, but it is also about remediation as feedback. Whatever circulates doesn’t end as diffusion, propagation, or dispersion; it comes back, feeding back onto itself.

If there is some critique I offer, I must first preface it with acknowledging again Novak’s open admittance of not necessarily resolving, of writing an unsettling ethnography, and also foregrounding the ambitious scope of *Japanoise*. Novak writes, “[a]nother goal of this book is to examine the role of technology in the formation of cultural subjects,” naming a fundamental question in the social sciences and the humanities (23). While Novak presents detailed literature reviews in other areas of academic enquiry, his engagement with the literature that deals with the various ways in which the relationship between humans and technology is understood to unfold seems lacking. While Novak is convincing in his account of technology as something central to Noise’s aesthetics of live performance, ways of circulation, and techniques of creating and listening, his account does not present explicit theorization about ways

in which we might be able to think about the unfolding of the human and the technical within specific localities. In this particular point, his approach is empirically rich, leaving ample room for theorization.

There is that famous line—“We murder to dissect”—in William Wordsworth’s “The Tables Turned.” But if we turn the tables another time—if we *dissect to murder*—we find precisely that which Novak *does not do* but, that which an inordinate amount of academic work does: divide a “problem” in order to conquer it, in order to get closer to “the truth.” Mirroring Novak’s resistance to laying out neat maps, I am risking writing a non-review, something far from a summary or a faithful-enough miniversion of the book that could stand in place of reading the book. In this risk I hope to purposefully provoke readers to go do some reading and listening for themselves, but perhaps more importantly, to do something beyond finding out or getting lost in a map.

